

NEW TERMS FOR NEW MUSIC

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ALONG with its new materials modern music has developed a new set of terms to define them. Words like "atonal," "polyharmony," etc., are more and more frequently used by modern composers in discussing their materials and by reviewers in their writings, as such terms have become indispensable for making distinctions between various modern systems.

A few years ago when nearly all so-called "modern" music sounded disagreeably the same to most listeners, a few clear terms pointed out to them differences not at first perceived without intellectual aid. Even now it is difficult to indicate very fine distinctions by means of modern terminology since the best known labels refer for the most part to general systems rather than to particular instances.

Modern composers usually intend a definite and specific meaning when they use a new term. Its general sense will be grasped by a majority of those who follow new music, although misunderstandings sometimes arise; but the public as a whole, however, has only the formation of the words themselves to guide it, from which mistaken conceptions are apt to arise.

To survey the meaning of some of the most customary modern terms in order to point out a few possible misunderstandings that may attach to them, should prove of assistance even to those who have ceased to refer to "polytonality" and "dissonant counterpoint," as if these were special effects, like *tremolando* or *ponticello*, a sort of bag of tricks easily employed by nearly all modernists to cover their supposed lack of ability to handle older materials. Not everyone realizes that "polytonality," for example, refers to the placing together of music in two or more tonal systems (or keys) simultaneously; and that to do this it is quite necessary to understand how to write music in each of the keys

separately, as well as the additional problems involved in relating all the notes between the juxtaposed keys. If there are differences of style between composers who write in only one key at a time, then it is evident that many more such distinctions are possible between composers who handle two keys at once, and that it is misleading to lump together all who write polytonally as though they were more or less alike.

The same point of view applies to other modern terms, nearly all of which are so broad in scope that they cover an entire field of music, within which the widest imaginable differences are possible; within which composers may be dry, expressive, classical, romantic, bad, mediocre, good or great.

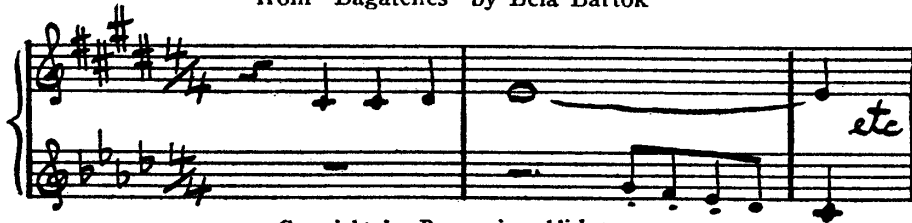
It is a mistake to assume that all these modern materials are entirely new. Isolated examples are being constantly found to show the use of what we call new materials in the works of the old masters, some of whom, in their greatness, were able to foreshadow the direction of musical tendencies. Dissonant counterpoint is suggested by the tenor aria from J. S. Bach's cantata, *Jesus Sleeps*. Polytonality is suggested by various passages in Bach (there is one in the *C# minor Prelude* from the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavichord*, in the middle of the second page) where harmonic and melodic minor scales are used against each other at the same time. A polychord is suggested in Beethoven's *Third Symphony* in the famous spot where dominant harmony is continued while the main theme is reannounced in the tonic.

However, if it is a fallacy to suppose that modern materials have sprung suddenly from nowhere, it is equally absurd to try to make out that modern musical usage is not new. The materials of modern music have been presaged in certain singled out instances and nearly all the new devices have been evolved through an expansion of well-known older materials but no listener can possibly confuse a passage in Beethoven containing a polyharmonic suggestion with the sort of polyharmony that is being written today. The term "polytonal" refers to the simultaneous use of more than one tonality. This assumes the employment of two or more different keys at once, but may also mean more, as tonality is a broader term than key and indicates a musical

homing instinct, the sense of a family grouping of certain tones about a given tonal center, rather than just the notes of a scale. In the carrying out of polytonality, however, major, minor, modal or specially constructed scales of various sorts are often used together, and in two ways. "Harmonic polytonality" is formed where closely related keys are coordinated smoothly, with a view to their blending together.

HARMONIC POLYTONALITY

from "Bagatelles" by Bela Bartok



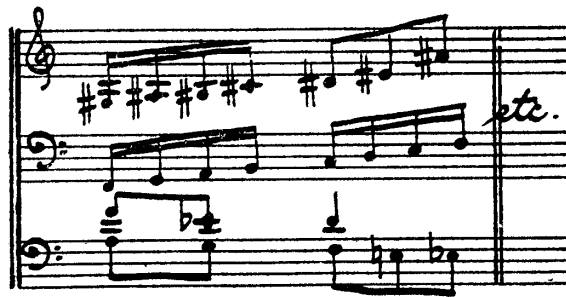
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(This is to be considered because the two keynotes, C \sharp and A \flat are enharmonically related as concords.)

"Contrapuntal polytonality" can be formed by setting more widely related keys against each other in such fashion that each one will stand out independently. A frequent misconception of the term polytonal is that it is taken from the word "polytone." Since polytone is not a term in accepted use, confusion as to the meaning of polytonality results.

CONTRAPUNTAL POLYTONALITY

from "Energia" by Carlos Chavez



If, when writing polytonally in, say, two keys together, a composer uses a chord in each of the

SUGGESTED POLYCHORD



in Different Keys
from
Arthur Honegger's
"Pacific 231"

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uses a chord in each of the keys, he will find himself employing simultaneously two different chords. The result is a "polychord." If he then continues to employ a succession of polychords, the connection between polychords as used

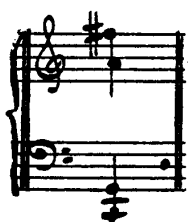
one after the other forms "polyharmony." The distinction between a polychord as a specific instance, and polyharmony as a more general term covering polychordal successions should not be lost sight of. Polychord denotes different chords placed to-

POLYHARMONIC SUCCESSION
from "Premonitions" by Charles Ives



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SUGGESTED POLYCHORD



All in Key of G
from
Igor Stravinsky's
"Suite"

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gether in definite relationships and with a view to blending. The same rules that govern the relations between single tones in a chord apply to the relations of chords in a polychord. It is quite possible to form polychords all the notes of which fall into the same key, but in actual use the chords are more often related polytonally.

Sometimes chords are placed against each other not so as to blend,

but in such a way that each component chord stands out as an entity, in which case we have a "counterchord." When a succession of counterchords is arranged so that lines of chords stand out against each other then the result should be recognized as "counterharmony."

COUNTERCHORD



from
"The Corpse"
by Leo Ornstein

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COUNTERHARMONIC SUCCESSION

from "The Corpse" by Leo Ornstein



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The word "atonal" is often abused. One frequent misapplication is that it means "without tone." It has also been carelessly taken to indicate "without harmony," "without melody," "without beauty." It means none of these things, but simply "without tonality." There are two opinions as to the application of the word; one is that atonal music must be without key center, the other that music in which key centers shift rapidly and without the feeling for return to a particular key may also be called atonal.

Atonalists must use a scale of equal steps for their music, for as soon as a scale of unequal steps such as the major or minor appears, a feeling of tonality is apt to prevail. The twelve tones of the chromatic scale are used by most atonalists as a base, the scale employed atonally being called a "duodeciple" scale, which differs from the chromatic one only by having no active tone tendencies. Other scales of equal steps, such as the whole tone scale or the quarter tone scale might also be used atonally. Atonality assumes equal temperament in tuning since just or other temperaments produce only scales of unequal intervals.

"Dissonant counterpoint" is a self-explanatory term, but it has been loosely applied to polyphonic music of a general nature in which some dissonance occurs. All the composers who may be said to employ dissonant counterpoint make so specific a use of the dissonances that rules of procedure seem to have been evolved, as fixed as those applying to strict consonant counterpoint.

DISSONANT COUNTERPOINT

from "L'Histoire du Soldat" by Igor Stravinsky



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Probably because it is a word covering so wide a field, rhythm in its newer applications has given rise to a number of confusing terms. How many can describe, for example, the exact differences

in meaning between the words "cross-rhythm," "poly-rhythm" and "counter-rhythm"? These terms seem scarcely definite enough as they do not indicate whether "rhythm" refers to the duration of notes or to their accenting; to a general movement or to a specific figure of rhythmical pattern. For example in his engrossingly interesting article on the structure of jazz in *Modern Music*, January 1927, Aaron Copland refers to the rhythms used in jazz which are characterized by accents in different parts at different times, as "poly-rhythms;" but poly-rhythm might easily mean different tempi together, or it might mean notes of different time values placed against each other.

"Cross-rhythm" is perhaps the most constantly employed of the newer rhythmical terms. It is usually taken to indicate notes of different time-value systems placed against each other, such as two against three, three against four, etc.; but even this is often applied in a confusing way. For example three half notes against six quarter notes, with the quarters accented in threes, is usually called a cross-rhythm, yet the notes are not in different systems, there being two quarter notes to one half note. The impression of a cross-rhythm is given by the difference in accenting.



The confusion in rhythmical terms might be avoided if some nomenclature were adopted which related more definitely to the particular type of rhythm meant. Suppose one used "time" to indicate duration, "accent" to indicate stress, "metre" to indicate the recurring stresses such as 3/4, 2/4, 6/8, etc., "tempo" to indicate rate of speed. Let us then take the word "cross," as it is now applied to time, to indicate regular systems against each other, such as two against three, etc. and "poly" to indicate more irregular accents or durations in the plural. This would give us a system of terminology for rhythm that would be self-explanatory; cross-time, cross-accent, cross-metre, cross-tempo would indicate one way of treating the combinations of the four rhythmical elements, and poly-time, poly-accent, poly-metre and poly-

tempo another. The following examples will illustrate my point.

CROSS-TIME



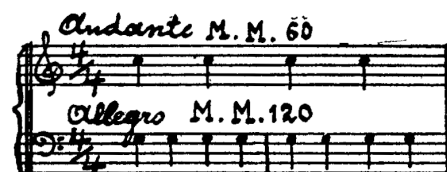
CROSS-ACCENT



CROSS-METRE



CROSS-TEMPO



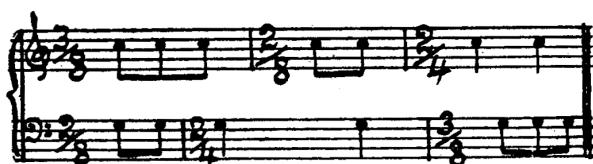
POLY-TIME



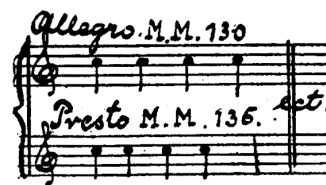
POLY-ACCENT



POLY-METRE



POLY-TEMPO



This, of course, is no attempt to make a complete survey of contemporary terminology, but rather to help clarify the meaning of a few terms in common use, with the idea that such knowledge may promote a better understanding of modern music and bring it closer to the rapidly approaching day when the newer resources are so standardized that they can be studied as definitely as the older harmony and counterpoint.