

beams, about their individual colour, though we are unlikely to mistake their peculiar brilliance. Just as this scenery has looked different to other periods, so its perspective and emphasis will change again, for the spotlights, as Toynbee might say, are 'provisional'. Thrown from our epoch, they illuminate as far as we can see at the moment. What remains astonishing is that we should have produced any individual of the size and strength to perform this creative act.

## INNOVATION AND TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC—I.

### THE TRADITIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MUSIC OF ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG

*RENÉ LEIBOWITZ*

WHEN it comes to criticizing or discussing the works of Arnold Schönberg and his school, few critics ever admit that the aspects in which these works differ from those of the past are of a secondary nature, whereas it is in their continuation of musical tradition that the primary problem lies. Possibly most critics have failed to notice the traditional aspect, and it may be because of this that, until now, many things have been said about the so-called special qualities of the music of Schönberg, Berg, and Webern, while hardly anything has been mentioned about their most important quality, which is their use of the essential principles of musical composition. The vague and misleading terms of 'atonal' and 'atonality', inevitably used in reference to their music, have done a lot of harm in this respect. In the first place, these terms are slogans and, like all slogans, a simplification

making things easy for those who do not wish to think. In the second place, they imply some sort of restraint where tones are concerned, and considering that music deals mainly with tones—i.e. sounds—this can only give a totally false picture of the aims of any true musician. For it is certain that the composers I am discussing are true musicians, and although it may appear academic, I shall attempt to demonstrate this precisely on the lines which so far, for some obscure reason, seem to have been avoided.

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What strikes most people on first hearing the works of Schönberg is their dissonant quality. Let me say, to begin with, that apart from the fact that there is no absolute difference between consonance and dissonance, many listeners have become quite accustomed to the 'worst' discords, and yet they have not become capable at the same time of appreciating or understanding even some of the relatively early works of Schönberg, Berg or Webern, in which the dissonances are not really very bad. This shows: (a) that the so-called dissonances are not the outstanding characteristic of these works, and (b) that the same dissonances, while being new elements, are also traditional ones.

Let us examine the second point first. The whole evolution of polyphony—ever since its very beginning, somewhere around the tenth century right down to the music of Wagner and the other romantics—shows a continuous progress in dissonance. At the beginning only very few harmonic relationships were considered to be consonant (unison, octaves, perfect fifths). Gradually more and more combinations of simultaneous sounds were promoted to the same rank (thirds, sixths, in some cases fourths). What is more, an increasing use was being made of dissonant chords until finally, in Wagner's music, it is possible to observe that the so-called dissonances are predominant. It thus becomes clear that the progressive and ever-increasing use of dissonance is one of the main aspects of musical tradition. Obviously, every real composer, while introducing new sounds—and thus being original—merely continues the logical chain of musical evolution, and in this is traditional. As I have said, people do get accustomed to the new sounds because there is no fundamental difference between them and the old ones. Wagner's harmony may be dissonant compared with Mozart's, yet it has now become agreeable to the ear—in fact, consonant—for most listeners.

From all this a new question arises: what is it exactly that has forced musical evolution into the path of increasing dissonance? The answer is a simple one. *It is the widening of the scope of the composer's awareness in regard to the possibilities of the chromatic scale.* The tonal system (which has been the basis of all musical practice during the last three centuries) although of diatonic origins, has incorporated, from its very beginning, the use of the possibilities offered by the chromatic scale. The progressive extension of these possibilities has determined the progress of dissonance. No wonder, then, if Wagner's music—essentially chromatic in so far as it investigates some possibilities of the chromatic scale unheard until then—also makes a preponderant use of dissonance.

The characteristics in this domain of Wagner's music determine the musical situation in which Schönberg found himself working at the beginning of his career, let us say somewhere around 1897. His genuine and strongly developed musical temperament attracted him towards the great masters of his time—Wagner, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler—whose language he assimilated with the greatest vigour. But, being in the true sense traditional, he also became an innovator (innovation as we have seen being essentially a traditional quality in all great composers), and therefore found himself compelled to further the tradition he inherited from the past. All the possibilities of the chromatic scale had to be used, and so all the harmonic and melodic figures to which this scale can give birth became permanent features in the music of Schönberg and his school.

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However, as I have already said, all this is only one particular aspect, certainly not the most important one, of this music. If this were the case, listeners who have long ago become familiar with new sounds, would by now appreciate Schönberg's music. The reason his music is so difficult to understand is simply that it is the work of a great composer, that is to say, of a man whose musical thought is rich and complex. To compose music is to think in musical features. When we analyse a piece of music we say: this is the melody, this the harmony, this the rhythm, the form is such, the orchestration used is such; moreover, we describe all these elements and we try to seize their logic and their interdependence. The composer thinks synthetically in melodies, harmonies, orchestral sounds, etc.: that is musical thought.

Like all thought, musical thought must be clearly stated and expressed in order to be understood, which means that it needs articulation, unity in spite of diversity, or to use Schönberg's own terms, 'logic in spite of variety'. The most important tool with which to produce this result is the concept of musical variation. All the great masters of the past have striven to incorporate this concept as the fundamental means of musical composition, but what has been implicit in the past has become explicit for the first time in the work of Arnold Schönberg.

There again, Schönberg's attitude is one of exceptional lucidity, *an attitude of awareness in regard to the principles of compositional problems.*

Such an attitude emphasizes the composer's real task, who thus considered, is a man who creates under the highest possible artistic tension, inventing incessantly, employing continuously all his faculties: a man whose richness of imagination must never be limited, but give birth to an unlimited amount of musical features while organizing them in a way that is logical and coherent.

The fundamental problem of composition may therefore be expressed as follows: *maximum of invention with minimum of means*, that is, invent a great variety of musical features while stating them as shortly and clearly as possible. If we admit this, we see that it becomes necessary to find a tool of sufficient power to produce coherence and unity where profusion could easily lead to chaos. As I have already pointed out, such a tool is to be found in the concept of variation, but the full potentialities of this concept, in the form inherited by Schönberg from the past, had not yet been developed. That is where Schönberg's innovation becomes radical. The concept of variation is extended to the concept of *perpetual variation*.

Let us look at this more closely. The idea of variation implies that we vary *something*. Perpetual variation means (a) that we vary continuously (which becomes identical to inventing new figures continuously), and (b) that we vary all the time the same thing. From there we deduce that the origin of the process of such composition is what Schönberg calls a *unifying idea*.

It is this unifying idea which, long before it led to Schönberg's so-called atonal works, has formed the main characteristic of his music. We need not wonder at the difficulty with which we are

confronted when we try to understand even some of his early scores. Already a work like the *First String Quartet*, in D minor, Op. 7 (1904) does not content itself with the elementary unity provided by the simple use of tonal functions. The musical thought is enriched here 'by a thematic superstructure of extraordinary compactness with regard to *motif*-relationships. The *First String Quartet*, a piece of unusual length and variety, is built on but a few basic thematic elements which appear again and again in manifold variations and combinations'.<sup>1</sup>

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We are now in possession of the two main principles which determine the character and evolution of Schönberg's music.

The continuous use of all the possibilities of the chromatic scale has led Schönberg to transgress the limits of the classical tonal system, which, originally diatonic, could no longer contain the elements thus produced. Harmonically, for instance, the classical theory admitted of only a few dozen chords (transposed on all the degrees they amount to a few hundred) while the chromatic scale is known to be able to produce 55 different chords of 3 sounds, 165 chords of 4 sounds, 330 chords of 5 sounds, 462 chords both of 6 and of 7 sounds, again 330, 165 and 55 chords of respectively 8, 9 and 10 sounds, 11 chords of 11 sounds, and one chord of 12 sounds, totalizing over 2,000, with transpositions over 4,000 chords. Needless to say, melodically also a similar enrichment takes place. By suspending the classical tonal functions (for the first time in his *Second String Quartet*, Op. 10, in 1908) Schönberg introduces a musical style in which all these new elements become permanent and definitive features.

We now come to the point when Schönberg was forced to make complete use of his concept of variation, or rather, when it became necessary for this concept to be formulated explicitly in the form of a precise technique of composition. The tonal functions, in spite of their not being an *end* but only a *means* of achieving unity, had the power to articulate and co-ordinate musical thought. The necessary suspension of these functions, however, deprives musical thought of one of its most powerful and most binding elements of organization. New means had to be found. For a few years (between 1908 and 1914) Schönberg does not seem to bother so much about all this, being at that time

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Krenek, *Studies in Counterpoint*. Schirmer, New York, 1940.

mainly preoccupied with the idea of carrying to its most extreme consequences the handling of the new 'chromatic' material. The chief works of this period are: the piano pieces, Op. 11 and Op. 19, the *George Lieder*, Op. 15, the five orchestral pieces, Op. 16, the two dramatic works *Erwartung* and *Die Glückliche Hand* and the *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21. In the latter work we find a tendency towards contrapuntal and rigorous forms, which indicates that the fundamental principles of composition as such, are again one of his major worries.

Between 1914 and 1922 Schönberg did not publish one single work. His time was devoted entirely to the research and formulation of a theoretical principle based on certain constant phenomena which occurred in his latest works and of those of his followers, Berg and Webern, a principle which would enable him to make up for the lack of tonal unity arising from the suspension of tonality. The result was to be the twelve-tone technique, first tried out in portions of the *Five Piano Pieces*, Op. 23, and in the *Serenade*, Op. 24 (1923), and finally completely adopted in the *Piano Suite*, Op. 25, and in the *Quintet for Wind Instruments*, Op. 26 (1924).

Concerning the origin of that technique Schönberg says: 'I was always occupied with the aim of basing the structure of my music consciously on a unifying idea, which produced not only all the other ideas but regulated also their accompaniment and the chords, the "harmonies"'.<sup>1</sup>

It is here that the concept of perpetual variation becomes a technical principle. The unifying idea is the musician's original thought. It may occur in the composer's mind in the form of a *motif*, a theme, a chord, or a series of chords. At any rate, its main characteristic is a series of intervals, either in horizontal or in vertical order. This series of intervals thus becomes the origin and support of all further ideas. In short, all the elements of a given composition will be perpetual variations of the original, fundamental series. Thus Schönberg creates the *serial technique* of which the *Five Piano Pieces*, Op. 23, make use in different ways. Its profound sense lies in the following points:

1. It unifies the melodic material.
2. It enhances the logic of harmony.
3. It creates the unity of melody and harmony.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Slominsky (published in the latter's book *Music since 1900*).

The first two points have, as we have seen, always been Schönberg's chief preoccupations; the second point in particular needed a new device since the suspension of the tonal functions. The third point is one of the most radical aspects of the concept of variation.<sup>1</sup>

The serial technique, combined with the attitude of accepting the total possibilities of the chromatic scale thus becomes the basis of the twelve-tone technique. The unifying idea is a series of twelve different sounds arranged in a certain order, which originates in the composer's mind. Together with its transpositions and typical derivations (inversion of the series and retrograde motions, these derivatives being classical types of melodical variation), the series is used functionally throughout the whole composition, and gives birth to all melodic and harmonic figures. Thus a method of composition is established which, without the aid of tonality, and based on the full and radical application of the concept of variation, makes it possible for the new musical features to organize themselves as logical coherent entities.

Such is an important part of Schönberg's contribution to musical tradition. Once more, let me say that the renewal thus brought about is a genuine and necessary consequence of the tradition itself. It is my firm belief that what differentiates Schönberg from other great masters is not more and not less than what has always differentiated one great master from another; that is to say, the specific and original qualities of their respective personalities. But what, in spite of a seemingly striking dissimilarity, creates a profound analogy between Schönberg and his great predecessors, is an attitude which they share concerning the fundamental and constant laws of logic, coherence and clearness applied to the organization of the musical material at their disposal.

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Schönberg's traditional achievements have still another aspect which I would like to mention. One can say, without exaggerating, that the height of musical romanticism caused a serious musical crisis. This crisis had many facets. In the first place, we

<sup>1</sup> Its origin can be traced back to the *Chamber Symphony*, Op. 9 (1906), where a series of fourths is used both melodically and harmonically as one of the main features and constructive elements of the work.



notice an overwhelming trend towards extra-musical preoccupations in the very act of composing itself. The consequences were the preponderance of opera and symphonic poems (the latter based on ever-increasing orchestral and choral means), and a virtual non-existence of chamber music. This, in its turn, brought with it: (a) a decadent sense of harmony which even in some of Wagner's operas is, during long stretches, *unfunctional* and only serves a descriptive and dramatic purpose, and (b) a total abandon of counterpoint which is one of the most powerful compositional devices.

Another important aspect of this crisis was the excessive specialization of composers. Whereas preceding generations had written works of every kind (chamber music, symphonic music, vocal music, church music, opera, etc.), Wagner, Verdi, and even Strauss, finally only wrote for the theatre, Bruckner and Mahler practically only symphonies and Hugo Wolf only songs. Even Brahms—less one-sided than the others—never wrote an opera, while Bach, for example, whose case in this respect is similar, had, all the same, used all the forms of dramatic singing (aria, arioso, recitativo) in his Passions and Cantatas.

Such a crisis was a threat to musical tradition as a whole, which has always expressed itself in a universal idiom capable of serving any particular musical enterprise.

It is also in this way that Schönberg appears through his very innovations as a highly traditional composer. His entire effort is directed towards a complete restitution of universality in the musical idiom.

His very early music already shows a masterly application of harmonic control and contrapuntal work, such as had ceased to exist during several generations of composers.

His *Chamber Symphony*, Op. 9, is a violent step forward. In order to understand the value and significance of this step, we must bear in mind that the specialization to which we have referred had also introduced a typical instrumental frame for every particular domain. The symphonic orchestra was, even in Mahler's symphonies, essentially the same for every work, chamber music used only a few stereotyped combinations, songs were mostly accompanied by the piano. Everything was conventional, the free instrumental choice, such as is to be found in Mozart's *Divertimentos* or in Bach's *Cantatas*, had completely



disappeared. In this sense the mere words *chamber symphony* shows an effort to blend two styles. By diluting the solid, conventional instrumental apparatus and by reintroducing free combinations, Schönberg has found a possibility of getting away from the 'specialized' styles, and preparing the basis of a new, universal and absolute musical idiom.

Such a result is also confirmed by the twelve-tone technique, the formulation of which constitutes a technical apparatus of universal value. Any composer who is preoccupied with the advanced problems of contemporary polyphony can learn it and adapt it for his own purposes. Musicians like Webern and Berg have written their last works in the new technique. They do not resemble each other, nor do they resemble Schönberg himself, nor do they resemble any of the other younger composers who have adopted the same method of composition. One thing, however, they all have in common: that is, precisely, the musical idiom which they all use in spite of personal differences, differences of temperament, of inclination, and so on.

In this sense the Schönberg school is only a term one uses for convenience; factually, what Schönberg has done is much more than to found a school. He has made the world aware of the authentic laws of musicianship and, like every great master, has saved a tradition which without him might have been lost.

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If this article promotes an understanding of Schönberg's significance, its purpose will be fulfilled, although why one writes so much about Schönberg and does not play his music instead, is a question which I find difficult to answer.

## VICTOR SERGE

# LETTER FROM MEXICO

IN the second World War, Mexico played the part of Switzerland in the nineteenth century and that of France at the beginning of our twentieth century, before June 1940: the part of a haven of refuge. Thus, in our convulsed world, the Atlantic fulfils the former function of the Mediterranean. In spite of transport difficulties, Mexico is sheltering 15,000 Spanish Republicans, 1,500 Poles, at least 1,500 Jews, and several hundred political