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MUSIC SURVEY

NEW SERIES
1949-1952

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DONALD MITCHELL
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CORRIGENDUM :—In the criticism of Martin Cooper's Schoenberg review on our last issue's p. 282, lines 11-13, ". . . an ear which mistakes its anxiety about the loss of tonal unity for a perception of dissonances and of the highest possible tension" cut the " and " which slipped in by sub-editorial mistake.

On the Twelve-Note Road

By LUIGI DALLAPICCOLA

FIRST, I must state my premises : what follows is not, nor does it set out to be, a study of the twelve-note system.

This will be sufficient justification, I hope, for the strongly and inevitably autobiographical character of my remarks ; inevitably, since my experience of twelve-note music began a long, long time before the publication of René Leibowitz's most useful books. I call them most useful, even if their usefulness has its unfortunate side : that of providing the most outstanding incompetents with the opportunity of passing themselves off as experts on a subject which is far from being strictly codified. It should be remembered that Arnold Schoenberg never gave lessons in the " twelve-note technique," and that as late as 1936 Ernst Krenek wrote : " Whoever speaks of, or deals with, questions arising out of the twelve-note technique, can even to this day only proceed on a basis of personal experience." (*Musica Viva*, Brussels-Zürich, No. 2).

As is well known, a single encounter can decide the orientation of a whole life. My orientation was decided on the night of April 1st, 1924, when I saw Arnold Schoenberg conduct a performance of his *Pierrot Lunaire*, in the Sala Bianca of the Palazzo Pitti. That night the students, with typical Latin gaiety, were indulging in the usual whistling before the performance began : the public for their part, caused an uproar, stamping their feet and laughing. But Giacomo Puccini did not laugh on that occasion. He listened to the performance with the utmost attention, following it with the score, and at the end of the concert asked to be introduced to Schoenberg.

Twenty-five years later, in a letter Schoenberg wrote to me on September 16th, 1949, the creator of the twelve-note system still remembered this gesture of our great popular composer, in these words : " Auf Puccini's Besuch der Pierrot-Aufführung war ich immer stolz. Es war sicherlich ein Zeichen menschlicher Grosse, dass er zu mir gekommen ist—und eine grosse Freundlichkeit."*

*" I have always been proud that Puccini came to see me after the performance of *Pierrot Lunaire*. His visit was truly a sign of human greatness—and showed great friendliness."

That he reproached me, in the same letter, for not having gone to shake his hand on that occasion, is another story. What qualifications had I, what fame of name or works, that I should dare present myself to the master? Six years later, in Berlin, I still refrained from taking such a step. For at that time Fascism had not yet schooled people to presumption by means of that propaganda which one might define as *the artificial facilitation of life*, and which led to the consequences we all know.

In those days, to get one of our works performed, we had to wait in a long queue; youths without works or fame did not hold positions in theatrical managements and concert societies; to teach the most elementary matters of technique in a conservatoire, one had first to undergo examinations (stupid ones, it is true, but they demanded much hard work); and it was not the twenty-year-olds who dispensed judgment in daily press criticisms.

I, to be sure, like many others, wrote down my impressions of the outstanding musical events—but in my diary. In this way one could listen to music simply, *con amore*: free from the pre-occupation of having to provide a considered judgment the following morning, as food for the public; free from having to find at all costs a central idea on which to base a *piece* which would *read well*; free from the fear of having to contradict tomorrow what one said yesterday; free, finally, from the fear of offending with one's opinions some *employer* who might think differently from oneself. The "Littoriali della Cultura e dell' Arte" † had not yet been created; and everyone was convinced that the way of the artist was a very difficult one.

The night on which I saw Arnold Schoenberg, I felt I had to make a decision. It goes without saying that I did not consider whether I should become *atonal*; for the time being, I decided to learn the trade.

In general, when people mention my name, they speak of me as a musician who has adopted the twelve-note technique; and one authority has not hesitated to point out the singularity of my position. The singularity, that is, of having adopted the twelve-note technique at a time when I had no contact with the masters of the Viennese school (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern), nor with their disciples. Perhaps I am not the only composer of my generation to find myself in this position; but I am ready to admit that it is a somewhat strange one.

†The "Littoriali della Cultura e dell' Arte" were a kind of cultural "games" held in Italy during the Fascist *régime*; the best way to win a prize was to be a member of the Fascist Party. [Trans.]

“ Etrange destin que celui de la musique atonale : voici qu'elle vient de devenir actuelle, elle, qui ne le fut pas, à l'époque de sa naissance. . . .” ‡ Thus Gisèle Brelet begins her study *Chances de la musique atonale* (Alexandria, 1947). And she continues : “ L'atonalisme est maintenant bien actuel : trop tôt venu, il lui fallait attendre que surgisse chez les musiciens la conscience des problèmes auxquelles il prétendait apporter une réponse.” §

Now whether or not one agrees with Gisèle Brelet (it is obvious that Schoenberg, Berg and Webern were aware of the problems with which they were faced), it has to be admitted that the phrase “ trop tôt venu ” has an element of truth in it.

Truth, at least, in relation to other composers, to whom Schoenberg's boldness must have seemed frightening ; and also in relation to the public, even the most cultured and knowledgeable public.

The reason for this is that when the phenomenon of atonality gave its first signs of existence, the art of Debussy was still in full flower ; and Stravinsky, notwithstanding the noisy fiasco of *Le Sacre*, swiftly won over at least the ballet public which, listening to the music with its eyes, found justification for it that way.

The reasons for Ravel's favourable attitude towards the Viennese school must be sought elsewhere. Ravel had a natural distrust of giving too free a rein to fancy (a thing which can easily happen in the course of improvisation), and he loved to have problems to solve. (The Sonata for violin and cello is a typical example.) I shall never forget how warmly D. E. Ingelbrecht, who knew Ravel extremely well, agreed with me when I said that Ravel would have come to write a piano concerto for the left hand even if Paul Wittgenstein had not provided the occasion ; and precisely in order to limit to the utmost the danger of improvisation.

Years ago, a composer of tonal music who is a friend of mine declared, in the course of an interview, that when composing he followed his instinct ; that he was opposed on principle to any kind of system ; and that the word “ *system* ” itself appeared to him to be synonymous with “ *trick*.”

Now, although I am grateful to this musician for the friendship he has often shown me, and have frequent cause to admire his music, I must say that I have not the same admiration for his sense of logic.

‡ “ A strange fate, that of atonal music : it has only just become a living reality, which it certainly was not at the time of its birth. . . . ”

§ “ Atonality is now a living reality : having arrived too early, it had to wait for musicians to become aware of the problems to which it claimed to provide an answer.”

The word “*system*” is, according to him, synonymous with “*trick*.” So far, so good ! By the very fact, however, that he writes tonal music, he himself makes use of a system codified from three centuries of experience, that is to say of a codified trick ; but this is used unconsciously because it has been learnt at school and because it forms part of us from the day of our birth. (It has been wittily said that God, who gave us the moral law, also took care, in His infinite bounty, to provide us with the tonal system). It seems likely, moreover, that when music passed from the modal system to the tonal system there was a critical period of uncertainty perhaps not very different from that which, according to many critics and listeners, is one of the most characteristic features of our time : a time of considerable confusion, but one which only superficial minds can reproach with lack of faith.

Atonality, “*trop tôt venu*,” was for a time abandoned : at least in the sense that it was forgotten (hence the amazement of so many critics at seeing it reappear again after the war). In the ten years immediately preceding the last war in Europe, the only topic of conversation was *neo-classicism*. Around 1930, Italian and foreign magazines stated, without a flicker of the eyelid, that “Germany had only one great musician : Paul Hindemith.” And performances of atonal or twelve-note music were made more and more difficult by political events. The advent of Adolf Hitler (a great connoisseur of art, like all self-respecting dictators) marked the end of public performances of such music in Germany. In Italy, performances were not forbidden, in the true sense of the word : but every day some *aesthete* (a critic-composer, of course) publicly arraigned one or other of the composers belonging to the so-called vanguard of *internationalism*, which in the language of those days meant *anti-fascism* or, more precisely, *communism*. Exactly how much attitudes of this kind have to do with strict problems of aesthetics is not for me to say. It is enough to say for the moment that even criticism has its *systems*. So-called atonal music had very seldom been performed before the arrival of Fascism, and was very seldom performed during the reign of Fascism : so that no difference was to be perceived.

Just at the time when everyone had ceased to mention atonality or twelve-note music, I began to be passionately interested in such problems. (I am grateful to Guido M. Gatti for pointing out my *unrealistic* position in a criticism on the Venice Festival of 1937.) And already, in the first period of my activities as a composer (from

1934 to 1939, that is from the *Divertimento in quattro esercizi* to *Volo di notte*), series of twelve notes begin to make their, undeniably timid, appearance in my works ; in some cases they were used for purely colouristic purposes, in others with exclusively melodic intent.

At that time I had need of a helpful guide, or at least a confidant or a not too fanatical opponent ; but I could not find one.

Every first performance of a work by Stravinsky was the event of the musical year ; Hindemith was the fashion ; Bartok was to wait ten years, that is till after his death, to be tardily *discovered*. (They always come at the right moment, the discoverers !) Whenever I turned to anyone for light on the twelve-note technique, I always received the reply " It's finished." Someone advised me in a kindly way not to waste my time on such *unrealistic* matters. In Italy, at that time, baroque music was considered *realistic*, and an attempt was being made to write music equivalent to the architecture of Bernini. (Alas ! in too many cases it turned out to be merely an equivalent of the architecture of Piacentini . . .).

So I found myself practically alone. With the invasion of Austria by Hitler's troops, it became more and more difficult to obtain the works of the masters of the Viennese school : the few articles which had appeared around 1925 were no longer to be found, and those I did manage to track down were so schematic that they gave me no help at all.

From time to time, I tried my hand at analysing atonal works. I went wrong with many of them : with others I was more successful. I noticed that a system of analysis which held good for one work did not hold good for another. Far from being discouraged by the comparatively few results I obtained, I remembered a phrase of Ferruccio Busoni : " Avoid making art a routine. Let each work constitute a principle."

With the outbreak of war, the possibility of getting information became even more limited than in the years immediately preceding, and the solitude I mentioned above gradually became a necessity.

I am fully aware that what follows, an account of the way in which I arrived at an understanding of the twelve-note technique, will seem in these days very ingenuous ; in these days, I say, because everyone can now obtain the scores of the Viennese school, and René Leibowitz's books explain down to the smallest detail the system which attracted me, giving accurately prepared analyses with the notes numbered according to the development of the series. But in 1940 all this did not exist. Whoever wished to take the road

towards twelve-note music had to rely entirely on his own capabilities. At a distance of several years I can count myself lucky in having achieved so much on my own, notwithstanding many mistakes.

I have already pointed out, some time ago, that the difficulty of understanding twelve-note music is not due to the large number of *dissonances* it contains. I had realized this as early as 1935, when I heard in Prague, at the thirteenth Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music, Anton Webern's Concerto, Op. 24, a work I admired because it seemed to me to express the composer's highest *ideal*, not because I had understood it as *music*. It was already clear to me then that the difficulty of understanding such music was due to other factors, especially to the fact that it made use of a new dialectic.

At the same Festival, when I heard Schoenberg's Variations, Op. 31, for the first time, I noticed something I had never been taught at the Conservatoire : that one of the most marked differences between classical music (I speak of sonata form, which is perhaps the highest achievement of classical music) and music based on a note-series could be formulated as follows. In classical music, the theme is nearly always subjected to *melodic* transformation, while its rhythm remains unaltered ; in music based on a note-series, the task of transformation is concerned with the *arrangement* of the notes, independent of rhythmic considerations. My first acquaintance with two great writers, James Joyce and Marcel Proust, date from this time.

Lacking treatises on twelve-note music and being unable to obtain the scores I needed, I found in the works of these writers confirmation of what I had dimly felt after hearing the works of Schoenberg and Webern.

In the works of James Joyce, above all in *Ulysses*, I was immediately struck by certain *assonances*.

Once already, years ago, I have had occasion to speak of certain *musical allusions* in the works of Webern, and to compare them with certain passages in *Ulysses* (*Il Mondo*, Florence, No. 15, 3rd November, 1945). The way in which Joyce exploits the name of Lynch, the young friend of Stephen Daedalus, is far from being a mere play on words.

In the brothel scene (corresponding to the Circe episode in the *Odyssey*) I found the following passage :

STEPHEN : Hm. (*He strikes a match and proceeds to light the cigarette with enigmatic melancholy*).

