SCHOENBERG IN THE UNITED STATES

By Roger Sessions

IN any survey of Schoenberg's work one fact must be emphasized above all: that no younger composer writes quite the same music as he would have written, had Schoenberg's music not existed. The influence of an artist is not, even during his life time, confined to his disciples or even to those who have felt the direct impact of his work. It is filtered through to the humblest participant, first in the work of other original artists who have absorbed and re-interpreted it for their own purposes; then through the work of hundreds of lesser individuals, who unconsciously reflect the new tendencies even when they are opposed to them. For genuinely new ideas determine the battle-grounds on which their opponents are forced to attack. In the very process of combat the latter undergo decisive experiences which help to carry the new ideas forward.

In Schoenberg's case this process is clear. The appearance, around 1911, of his first completely characteristic works, and of his 'Harmonielehre,' mark the approximate beginning of the years that were decisive in the formation of contemporary music. True, these works—both music and book—only carried to more radical conclusions tendencies already present in the music of the time; these manifestations, then hailed as revolutionary, seem to us now more like footnotes and queries to established modes of thought than integral and challenging steps towards new ones. What was new in Debussy and Ravel and Scriabin seemed more fundamental and far-reaching than it does to-day.

But in the three piano pieces, Op. 11, and the five orchestral pieces, Op. 16, a much more thorough-going challenge became evident. What led in Wagner to an enlargement of musical resources, in Debussy and Scriabin to the cultivation of special and restricted corners, here openly insists that new resources, having multiplied to an overwhelming extent, demand a logic of their own, depriving the earlier principles of their validity even in music of a relatively conventional type. The 'Harmonielehre,' which exerted its influence on some of the least likely likely persons, raised the same questions in the realm of theory, deducing them from the very logic of previous practice. The musical *status quo* has never completely recovered from the blow.

In 1933 Schoenberg came to the United States and ten years later became an American citizen. In the country to which he came, musical activity is intense on many levels, and despite many necessary reservations the development within the last generation has been phenomenal. Musical education has penetrated everywhere; both the general level and the quality of instruction available on the highest level of all have risen to a degree amazing to all who confronted the musical conditions of thirty-five years ago. American composers of serious intent have begun to appear in considerable numbers, and to achieve an influence and recognition undreamed by their predecessors; moreover, they have become aware of themselves, of their inner and outer problems, and better equipped to face these. Above all it has become evident that musical talent, the raw material from which musical culture grows, is strikingly abundant.

It is however clear that the institutional structure of music in the United States has not yet been established in definitive outlines. The relationship between the art and the business of music, and of both of these with the 'public'; the role and direction of musical education; the influence of radio, gramophone, and amateur musical activities—these are questions which in the United States are still fundamentally unsettled. There is similar confusion as to what we may call the structure of musical effort: the respective roles in musical culture and production of the composer, performer, critic, and scholar.

These latter observations are true of course not only of the United States but of modern civilization in general. But conditions here differ from those elsewhere in the fact that whereas elsewhere the forces of opposition are those of an established cultural tradition, here there is a perceptible undertow in the growing musical consciousness of a culture still in the making. It is this which keeps the musical life of the country in a state of constant change and flux, and which make the situation chaotic but far from hopeless.

It is not surprising therefore that Schoenberg should have found himself in a quite new relationship to his environment and that his impact should have taken on a new significance. I do not mean to minimize the importance of either the revolutionary or the specifically Viennese Schoenberg. The former has already affected the course of music in a profound sense, and though possibly the first full impact of a composer's work is the most immediately powerful one—think of the 'Eroica,' of 'Tristan,' in contrast to the last quartets or 'Parsifal'—nevertheless with the constant ripening of his art, the latter imposes itself in another, more gradual and more definitely constructive, sense. But that is a task for the composer's successors, and is even independent of his purely historical importance.

As for Vienna, Schoenberg has outlived it as he has outlived Alban Berg. Had he not done so his position might be to-day less evident than it is. There are other musicians from Central, also from Western and Eastern, Europe, whose impact has been purely provincial; they have conceived their mission as that of winning spheres of influence for their own native background; and have found—by an inexorable law of human polarization—the most sympathetic acclaim often in circles most tenacious in the pursuit of an American "national" style. Undeniably Schoenberg is a product of Vienna, and of a Viennese tradition with which he is as deeply imbued as anyone living. But it is characteristic of the man, the situation, and possibly of the Viennese tradition itself that his impact on the United States has been that of a third Schoenberg—one by no means unknown in Europe nor difficult to find for those who sought him, but one often obscured in the heat of controversy and the battle positions which his followers were led to assume in his behalf. For in coming to the United States he left the scene of his most bitter struggles; he came with the prestige of a fighter of distant and only dimly understood battles; with the respect and admiration of a few to whom the battles were neither so distant nor so dimly understood. Others recognized the achievement of the composer of 'Verklaerte Nacht' and other early works, and were ready to acclaim him as at least an asset to American musical life.

He taught and lectured in Boston and New York and finally was appointed Professor of Music, first at the University of Southern California, later at the University of California in Los Angeles. His music received sporadic performances; he found himself frequently quoted, frequently in demand as a writer and lecturer. His main influence, however, has been exerted through his teaching, the musicians with whom he has come in contact, and finally the series of works composed in the years since he has lived in the United States —works which in my opinion represent a separate phase and a new level in his music as a whole.

These works include a suite for strings, written in 1934; the fourth string quartet written in 1936 and performed by the Kolisch Quartet in 1937; the violin concerto, performed in 1940 by Louis Krasner with the Philadelphia Orchestra; a second chamber symphony; a setting of the Kol Nidrei for chorus and orchestra; 'Variations on a Recitative' for organ, first performed by Carl Weinrich for the United States section of the I.S.C.M. in March, 1944; the concerto for piano first performed by Edward Steuermann and the Philadelphia Orchestra in the spring of this year; finally two works shortly to be performed, the 'Ode to Napoleon,' after Byron, for *sprechstimme*, piano and strings, and a theme and variations, written originally for band and later arranged for orchestra.

Of these works, the suite is consciously in an 'old style,' and the second chamber symphony is the completion of a work left unfinished some forty years earlier. With the latter, the organ variations have given rise to rumours of a 'conservative' trend in Schoenberg's music—a 'return' at least to 'tonality' and to a more 'consonant' style. No doubt, the new variations and possibly the Ode, both shortly to receive their world premières, will add to these rumours which purport to herald a 'capitulation' on Schoenberg's part. The organ variations are extremely freely but none the less unmistakably, in the key of D minor, though also in the twelve-tone system; the orchestral variations are in G minor, signature and all, and definitely in a simpler style. The 'Ode to Napoleon,' though still in the twelve-tone system, is superficially more 'consonant' than many of Schoenberg's earlier works in that, to a very large extent, its style is characterized by the superimposition of triads and their derivatives. It is however doubtful if either the Ode or

the organ variations will prove comforting to those who pretend to see any reversal on Schoenberg's part. They are presumably quite as 'forbidding' as any of his reputedly 'atonal' works.

'Atonality,' in fact, is a conception which Schoenberg has never accepted and which has certainly no relationship to the experience of a practiced listener to his music. If 'tonality' means anything in other than academic terms it must certainly denote the *sensation* of relationships between tones, and of functional differences arising from these relationships. The tonic, the leading-tone, and so on are sensations habitual in all listeners. In no sense are they mere theoretical abstractions; they are not inextricably bound up with any systematic formula yet established nor are they in the last analysis definable in terms of any such formula alone. The prevailing harmonic concepts or definitions of 'tonality' are inadequate not only to the music of contemporary composers, but to many elusive problems in classic music. It should however be clear that these inadequacies are in no manner to be conjured away through the adoption of the essentially meaningless term 'atonal,' any more than the presence or absence of an occasional triad or six chord is of more than incidental significance in determining the characteristics of a style such as Schoenberg's.

I believe that in these works written since 1936 Schoenberg has achieved a freedom and resourcefulness which carries them in this respect far beyond his earlier works, especially those in the twelve-tone technique. Regarding that technique itself much misleading nonsense has been written. I am in no sense a spokesman for it; I have never been attracted to it as a principle of composition. But one must distinguish carefully between technical principles in the abstract, and the works in which they become embodied; even a great work does not validate a dubious principle, nor does a valid principle produce in itself good or even technically convincing work. It would for example be easy, though basically irrelevant, to show that Beethoven's 'Heiliger Dankgesang' in the Lydian mode, like most other modern 'modal' works, is based on a technically specious conception of the nature and function of the modes. Similarly, assuming the fugue or the sonata to have been valid as principles of musical structure, how many grievous sins have been committed in their names!

One can not too often insist that in music it is the composer's inner world of tone and rhythm which matter, and that whatever technical means he chooses in order to give it structure and coherence are subject to no *a priori* judgment whatever. The essential is that structure and coherence be present; and the demand which art makes on its creator is simply that his technique be sufficiently mastered to become an obedient and flexible instrument in his hands. True, the twelve-tone technique became at one time a fighting slogan; this happened under the stress of combat, the inevitable result of bitter opposition met by Schoenberg and his disciples. To-day however it is no longer invoked as a universal principle; it is recognized for what it is as a mode of technical procedure, a principle which evolves and becomes modified by practice. Once more—the significance of music springs solely from the composer's imagination and not from ideas about technique. The latter are merely tools which he forges for himself, for his own purposes. They gain what validity they possess from the results, in music, to which they make their imponderable contribution.

In regard to Schoenberg's work it may also be stressed that the twelve-tone technique is a part of the *process* rather than an essential element of the form. It is not essential or even possible for the listener to apprehend it in all its various transformations. He must listen to Schoenberg's music in exactly the same spirit as he listens to any music whatever, and bring to it the same kind of response. If he is fortunate he will from the first discover moments of profound and intense beauty which will tempt him further. He will always find that the music makes the utmost demands on his ear and his musical understanding, and he will probably find that with a little familiarity it begins to impose itself. In any case, esoteric notions or strained efforts will, as in the case of all music, serve as a barrier rather than as an aid to his understanding.

So if in some works of the 'twenties one feels a certain tenseness and dogmatic insistence, one must regard that as a necessary phase in Schoenberg's development. At that time he was exploring and mastering the resources of the new technique. In the words of the last ten years one feels no such limitation. The technique is

used with the ease of virtuosity, with complete resourcefulness, and with such freedom that it is sometimes difficult to discover. The fourth quartet, the violin and the piano concertos are, as far as I can see, his finest achievements of these years, perhaps of his whole work. They are larger in scope, if not in gesture, than the 'Ode to Napoleon' or the organ variations; like these they are in no conceivable wise more 'conservative' than the earlier works even though they differ from these in several essential respects.

They differ first of all in their longer and broader lines. This is not simply a question of 'continuity'; Schoenberg has always been in this respect a master of form, and in no work known to me can he be accused of a lack of logic. But—with those qualifications and exceptions—the individual details are underlined to a degree that they, rather than the larger lines, seem to bear the main expressive burden. It is a question of emphasis; the 'fragmentary' impression that disturbs many listeners results from the fact that every sensation is intensified to the utmost degree. All contrasts are of the sharpest kind, and it is not surprising that they strike the hearer most forcibly, even after familiarity with the work has brought their essential continuity more to the fore. In the later works, above all in the piano concerto, the expressive emphasis shifts strikingly to the line as a whole. A sustained melodic line becomes the rule rather than the exception. The melodic style itself has become more concentrated, less extravagant and diffuse in detail. I am tempted to cite examples: the graceful melody which opens the piano concerto; the declamatory opening phrase of the slow movement of the quartet; or the haunting and tender *Andante* of the violin concerto.

The very adoption of the concerto form, with the predominance of one instrument, underlines this tendency. Through Schoenberg's uncompromising polyphony results in a large measure of obbligato treatment of the solo parts, especially in the piano concerto, this treatment is nevertheless on the broadest lines, the constant tone quality contributing unmistakably to the architectonics of the works. Equally consistent is the orchestral dress. Though certainly as vivid as in the earlier works, it contrasts strikingly with these in that it, too, is laid out on broader lines. The constant and kaleidoscopic change so characteristic of the five orchestral pieces or the Bach transcriptions, has been superseded by a style in which tone colours, in all their characteristic boldness, remain constant over longer stretches, and are opposed to each other in sharply defined and large-scale contrasts. Needless to say, the instruments are employed with complete freedom from preconceived ideas and with full awareness of the relationship between ends and means. While it makes extreme demands, technical and otherwise, on the performers—the solo parts of both concertos are truly formidable—it does so always with full awareness; the demands lie in the musical ideas themselves and are in no way superimposed on them. They pose new problems for the performers—but they have this in common with much of the best music of every generation.

These works possess other and more elusive characteristics, at some of which I have already hinted in connection with the 'Ode to Napoleon.' It is not easy concretely to demonstrate, in the two concertos and the quartet, a still wider range of harmonic effect—one which includes all the simplest as well as the most complex relationships—or a much vaster harmonic line, at the least suggesting a new tonal principle, powerfully binding like the Ode but embracing all possible relationships within the chromatic scale. As far as I know, no adequate study has yet been made of Schoenberg's work in its harmonic and tonal aspects—aspects which lie deeper than the twelve-tone system or the individual sonority, and guide the ear of the listener in his real apprehension of the music. The above-mentioned qualities seem to me however strikingly present in all of this later music and a most important element in the effect of unity, sweeping movement, and concentration which the works produce. If I express myself cautiously in this regard it is because they raise questions of capital importance, for which nothing less than a painstaking effort of research, and a totally new theoretical formulation, would be necessary. Meanwhile the works are there, with a new challenge, different in kind but perhaps not in importance from that embodied in the three piano pieces and the five orchestral pieces thirty-odd years ago.

The above remarks are at best cursory and convey all too little idea of the works themselves. It goes without saying that

performances have been very few, and their real impact limited. The scores are available, however, through the foresight of G. Schirmer, Inc. The enthusiasm of many of the most gifted among young musicians as well as the gradually deepening interest of their elders is one of the striking phenomena of a period in which the prevailing trend seems superficially to be all in the direction of a not entirely genuine 'mass appeal,' facile and standardized effect, and a kind of hasty shabbiness of conception and workmanship.

As a teacher Schoenberg has fought against these latter tendencies with undiminished energy. Here, too, his influence has been both direct and indirect. In New York and especially in California considerable numbers of Americans have passed under his instruction. At one time he even was in demand among the composers of film music in Hollywood; his demands however proved too high, and composers in search of easy formulas of effect withdrew in disappointment. The same thing has happened to those who have gone to Schoenberg in the hopes of learning to compose in the twelve-tone system or in the 'modern idiom.' Nothing is farther from Schoenberg's ideas than that sort of instruction. He does not, in fact, preoccupy himself with 'style' at all, in the usual sense of the word. What concerns him is the musical development, in the most integral sense, of the pupil. He insists on the most rigorous training in harmony and counterpoint; those familiar with his 'Harmonielehre' must needs appreciate the extent to which this is true. For one who has never been his pupil, the striking feature of his teaching is precisely that it is systematic without ever becoming a 'system' in any closed sense; that it is almost fanatically rigorous in its ceaseless striving after mastery of resource; logical and clear in its presentation of materials, but as free as teaching can be from any essential dogmatic bias. It is based on constant experiment and observation; theoretical comment is offered always in the most pragmatic spirit—as an aid to the clarification of technical problems and not as abstract principle. They are literally, as with many such features in the 'Harmonielehre,' the observations of a keen and experienced mind with reference to a specific matter in hand, to which they are completely subordinate.

Musical experience, and development through experience, is Schoenberg's watchword as a teacher. His pupils speak of his boundless love for music—the energy of his enthusiasm for a classic work as he analyses it in his classes, or of the demands on which he insists in its performance by them. They speak of his tireless energy in asking of them—above all the gifted ones—that they bring into their work the last degree of resourcefulness of which they are capable. It is not surprising that under such instruction they learn to make the greatest demands on themselves, or that their love of music and sense for music is developed both in depth and intensity as a result. It is this which distinguishes Schoenberg's pupils above all—their training is not merely in 'craftmanship' but an integral training of their *musicality*, of ear and of response. The conceptions which they have gained are rounded and definite; they have not only gained tools of composition, but have developed also their own individual sense of the purposes for which these tools are to be used.

In complete agreement they testify to the fact that nothing has been taught them of the twelve-tone system or of 'modern' composition as such. Schoenberg's attitude is that musicians must come to these things, too, through development and necessity or not come to them at all. Having given them a basis on which they can develop further, and a sense of the demands of art, he insists that they must find for themselves their path in the contemporary world. He is fond of telling them that there is still much good music to be written in C major, and offering them no encouragement to follow the paths he himself has chosen.

Perhaps it will be seen from this what I meant in speaking at the beginning of this paper of a 'third Schoenberg.' In his educational tenets he has not, of course, changed through living in the United States. But he has brought these tenets from the principal stronghold of a great and old tradition to a fresh land which is beginning slowly and even cautiously to feel its musical strength. He has given to many young musicians by direct influence, and to others through his disciples, a renewed sense of all that music is and has been, and it is hardly over-bold to foresee that this is going to play its role, perhaps a mighty one, in the musical development of the United States. A small testimony to what this new contact may produce may be seen in a very valuable little book—'Models for Beginners in

Composition '—which Schoenberg prepared for students in a six-weeks' summer course in California. Certainly the eagerly awaited treatise on counterpoint, and the one also planned on the principles of composition, based on Beethoven's practice, will furnish deeper insights; they cannot fail to prove to be works of capital value. But the little book has for me a special significance as a moving testimony to Schoenberg's relationship to the American musical scene, and his brilliantly successful efforts to come to grips with certain of its problems.

In this essay I have purposely avoided dwelling on the more problematical aspects of Schoenberg and his work; I have made no attempt at an exact or careful estimate. No doubt, Schoenberg is still in many respects a problematical figure, as is every other living composer. But it seems more relevant to regard him as a source of energy and impulse; final estimates may well be left to posterity, and the habit of attempting them at every turn is one of the dangerously sterile features of our contemporary culture. It is a symptom of a rather nervous self-consciousness and above all of self-distrust.

What is essential now is to recognize the need our world has for the qualities that Schoenberg possesses, and how admirably he supplies our need. In a world-wide condition in which the rewards of facile mediocrity and of compromise are greater than ever, and in which one hears an ever insistent demand that music and the other arts devote themselves to the task of furnishing bread and circuses to an economically or politically pliable multitude, the musical world yet celebrates in sincere homage the seventieth birthday of an artist who not only, in the face of the most bitter and persistent opposition, scorn and neglect, has always gone his own way in uncompromising integrity and independence, but who has been and is still the most dangerous enemy of the musical *status quo*. This takes place in spite of the fact that his work is all too seldom performed, that it is exacting in the extreme, and is virtually unknown except to a very few who have made the attempt really to penetrate its secrets. It is in the last analysis an act of gratitude to one who has, so much more than any other individual, been one of the masculine forces that have shaped the music of our time, even that music which seems farthest from his own. It is not only a tribute to a truly great musician, but a hopeful sign that art on the highest level may still survive the bewilderments and the terrors of a mighty world crisis, of which so much is still ahead of us, and which contains so many imponderables.

ASPECTS OF FILM MUSIC

By Muir Mathieson

"I BELIEVE that film music is capable of becoming, and to a certain extent already is, a fine art, but it is applied art, and a specialized art at that." Dr. R. Vaughan Williams said this in an article he wrote for the R.C.M. Magazine not long ago. It would seem that *Tempo* agrees with Vaughan Williams, proof of which is its decision to publish regular critical articles on contemporary film music in future issues.

For my part, I am delighted. It must be nearly ten years since I expressed the belief that film music was destined to become something more than a mere colourful background to a film. I felt that music written for the screen could not only become an integral part of the film—an integral part even in the development of the film—but would soon be valued as an entity in itself. Today there is much evidence to show that this is so. It is beginning to be obvious that some of the music from the film scores of the last few years will take its place with the best of theatre music—for example, the 'Peer Gynt' and the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' suites. It is in regard to the critical appreciation of the public and its relation to composers through the medium of the film that I want to write; there are some factors, possibly not appreciated by everyone, which have affected the progress we are making today.

Many of the best British composers are now writing regularly for the film. It is not surprising, when you look at the list of distinguished names, that some of their film music is beginning to find its way into the contemporary repertoire. It is fitting therefore that this music should be criticized in an enlightened fashion when it is first heard; but critized always with an eye to the context, as well as to its purely musical value.

To understand the problems of film