The Stravinsky Theories

Author(s): Edward Mitchell

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 63, No. 949 (Mar. 1, 1922), pp. 162-164

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/910085>

Accessed: 05-06-2016 07:55 UTC

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not pointed out to him, this reader—whom I so hopefully assume will be sufficiently sceptical of my statements to verify them by referring to my subject-matter—may not notice them at all. I do not want to insult his intelligence. I know I am always finding new instances of this delicate ingenuity in Madrigals with which I had imagined myself fairly familiar. Nor is this feeling for illustrative treatment which is so significant a feature of the madrigalists' technique always confined to musical passages referring directly to the words. So surely was it used, so profoundly was it part of their idiom, that it enabled them by allusions to previous musical material and the ideas associated with it to achieve something that might be compared to the symphonic development of Beethoven, or, more nearly, to the symbolic development of Bach. Dr. Fellowes on page 216 of his book gives an example of this allusiveness from Wilbye's *Oft have I vowed* which shows how closely the texture of these works should be examined to appreciate to the full the care and reticent skill which made them. Equally subtle, and much further, removed is the allusion to the opening of *O care, thou wilt despatch me* in the opening of the second half of the Madrigal *Hence, care! thou art too cruel*, where the revolt against overwhelming sorrow implied in the words is illustrated by the thrusting up of the drooping E flat of the first opening into that unforgettable E natural which transforms the whole passage and gives rise to the amazing modulations which follow. Both passages are quoted by Dr. Fellowes, who gives a valuable analysis of the whole Madrigal, which even if it alone of his works had survived would suffice to stamp Weelkes as a composer of the greatest power and originality.

(To be continued.)

THE STRAVINSKY THEORIES

BY EDWARD MITCHELL

One of the most surprising features in connection with the recent Stravinsky offensive has been the singular inability of his chief protagonists to think right out the problem raised by his latest productions, and to see clearly whither the theories upon which they are based must inevitably lead him. Discussion, too, has centred largely round the *Rite of Spring*, and it does not seem to have been generally realised that Stravinsky's theories are better to be tested by reference to the Symphony for Wind Instruments. For one thing, it has no titular associations, and, secondly, it is a much later work. Embodying as it does those ideas which Stravinsky is said to have been evolving ever since he set out on his career as composer, it enables us to assess their value with some degree of certainty.

Before proceeding further, however, I feel impelled to express a doubt concerning the composer's intellectual honesty, judging from certain things he said in his recent interview with an

Observer representative. For example, his conception of form as being conditioned entirely by materials is so far from the truth that it would be almost uncharitable to assume that this was the considered opinion of a thinking individual.

Mr. Percy Scholes is well worth quoting here. He says:

In all works of art there must be some measure of give and take, and form and material must, surely, sometimes bend to each other. A pencil sketch, an etching, a water-colour, and an oil-painting differ in their materials, but share a large measure of common form. There is such a thing as a general principle of form, apart from the materials used.

This, I think, is unanswerable.

Still more fantastic perhaps is his (Stravinsky's) idea of the painter employing a subject merely as an 'excuse' for painting. A painter dealing with purely abstract conceptions (the type of artist presumably in his mind) quite naturally does not bother about subjects or models. He is content to rely upon line and colour as media for expression. I cannot imagine any painter employing a subject without at the same time regarding it as an essential factor in the success of his scheme, whether the subject be one from nature, from human life, or from the world of material things. Enough has been said upon this point, however, and I must return to my main theme.

The Symphony for Wind Instruments, then, is avowedly an attempt to produce 'music itself'*; that is, music entirely free from 'extra-musical emotion,'* 'uninhibited by extraneous intentions and architectonic formulæ.† The composer's sole objective apparently is 'sonorous emotion,‡ and he has endeavoured to achieve this by seeking 'relief from harmonic associations'‡ in a 'polyphony of timbres,'‡ and we are told that his extreme dissonance is used to assist this process. Unfortunately for the work and its composer, the Symphony comes perilously near to being a complete fulfilment of these principles, which, although they might have served for the music-making of primitive man, are not very creditable as mental products of a 20th century composer. Let us examine them.

First of all, as the end in view, we must take 'music itself,' music the sole content of which is to be 'sonorous emotion,' and we must begin our chain of argument with a restatement of some elementary facts. I do not think that anyone is in need of a reminder that sound, like colour, has emotion, and that different sounds produce in the listener different emotions. The simplest classification possible is, of course, that of sounds pleasant and unpleasant, albeit we must not forget that what is pleasant for one person is not necessarily so for another. But we notice that the pleasure derived from the pleasant sounds varies with the particular one we listen to. For many people, the noise of the sea is as delightful as that of a running stream. Some, although aware of a distinction, would find it perhaps too

* Stravinsky.

† Leigh Henry.

‡ Edwin Evans.

indefinite for clear expression. Others, capable in some degree of analysing their reactions, would suggest that the former exhilarated and the latter soothed. A few might go still further and attempt an association of ideas. The plashing of waves could be linked up with the idea of playfulness, and the stream's flow with that of contentment. It depends upon the degree to which the imagination has been stirred. In the same way the sounds of musical instruments can be basically divided into pleasant and unpleasant, according as the tone is good or bad.

In the many differences of timbre we have of course a great variety of effect. Some distinctions are subtle, others almost violently obvious. The crux of the problem, however, is this: Granted that differences of timbre, as of the beautiful sounds in nature, produce varying reactions in the listener, what is the type and value of the emotion aroused by a single note played on any given instrument? * In fairness to Stravinsky, we must now presuppose that the listener is a sensitive and artistically-minded person, capable of fully appreciating tonal values. To such a person, oboe tone will perhaps appeal as wistful; flute tone as plaintive; upper register horn tone (*pianissimo*) as suggestive of things remote or visionary. Instances could be multiplied until the whole field of instrumental tone had been covered, but in every case the emotion would be of the same kind—vague, shadowy, and indefinite, and entirely subordinate to that which is the chief element in (the so-called) sonorous emotion, viz., the sensuous thrill of pleasure which one derives not only from beauty of sound, but also from beauty of taste and smell. In other words, sonorous emotion is primarily superficial, and has no power to call up but the palest reflections of a few of the more spiritual emotions which give life its true significance.

Another aspect of the problem has now to be considered, and I must return to my example from nature. The association of ideas with the noise of the sea and the stream becomes possible only by virtue of the rhythm with which the sound of both is invested. It is the quiet, steady rhythm of the stream's murmur, even more than the actual sound, which suggests soothing contentment; we have only to conceive a change of rhythm for a great alteration to be produced in the effect upon the listener. It is just at this point that Stravinsky becomes inconsistent, for he has always attached (and still attaches) great importance to rhythm. But the moment we admit rhythm as an essential factor in music, we can no longer have purely sonorous emotion. On the contrary, your

emotional effects will depend much more upon the rhythms employed than upon the instruments used. The wistful tinge in oboe timbre, for example, will no longer be perceptible if the instrument be given a lively rhythm. It matters little, however, whether 'music' be limited to purely sonorous emotion or to emotion which is a compound of the sonorous and rhythmic. In either case, music becomes a thing entirely devoid of personality—in the spiritual sense of the word.* To carry the argument to its logical (but absurd) conclusion, we have only to allow the orchestra to tune up and a work of art will be produced. And we shall require new definitions of both 'art' and 'artist.' The expression of personal feeling will become the deadliest of artistic sins. If Stravinsky be correct, every one of his great predecessors and contemporaries must be wrong. Amongst the poets, too, only Marinetti and his foolish followers (whose lines consist apparently of disconnected vowels and consonants—pure poetry, this!), only these poor imbeciles will rank as true artists. Indeed, they fulfil Stravinsky's artistic ideals more completely than he himself does, although the opening phrase of the Symphony comes very near success in this respect. Various disjointed and strident notes appear in the brass with an effect so much akin to a donkey's bray as to make one sympathise with the laughter of the audience. The asinine effect is probably accidental (at least we hope so, as the work is dedicated to the memory of Debussy), but I think Stravinsky must, at this point, have committed a slight error of judgment in the balancing of his parts.

The composer, as I have already mentioned, has sought to achieve his end by seeking 'relief from harmonic associations' in a 'polyphony of timbres.' These polyphonic passages (in the Symphony) consist of four or five strands of orchestral colour proceeding quite independently, and in such dissonance as to (successfully) 'resist the tendency to harmonic fusion.' To gauge the significance of each strand we must listen 'horizontally.' Beyond the fact that the contrasting of colours heightens the intensity of each (provided that the contrasts be made judiciously) there is nothing of gain in all this. By deliberately denying fusion to his various strands, Stravinsky robs himself of that which is most beautiful in polyphonic writing, viz., the ever-present relation of each and every part to that co-ordinating and unifying idea which is always implied although sometimes not completely expressed. This is a high price to pay for 'relief from harmonic associations.' Indeed, one is again forced to the conclusion that disordered polyphony of this kind would be quite as well accomplished if left to the orchestral players themselves. Their individual melodic strands would probably lack significance, but this would be all to the good, as a significant theme must be abhorrent to a Stravinskist.

* It may be asked why I should take a single note. My answer is, that to form a true estimate of sonorous emotion every other emotional factor must be eliminated. It may be asked why, in order to make my analogy more exact, I did not take a single note from nature—a bird's note obviously suggests itself. The bird, however, sings or calls with an 'extraneous intention,' and is consequently barred. On the other hand, as we shall see in a few moments, Stravinsky admits rhythm as an essential factor in music, hence the example I selected is really the more appropriate.

* A composer may be 'personal' in his handling of rhythm as in the way he walks, but obviously this is not the same thing as personality.

Even in his actual handling of colour I do not think Stravinsky has been conspicuously successful in the Symphony. In some of his earlier works I should be the first to admit that he has done some remarkable things in this way—for example, the music which accompanies the Chinese procession in *The Nightingale*. Here, however, we are in the domain of the ballet, and further comment upon its music would be irrelevant in a discussion concerning 'pure' music.

Enough has been said, I think, to indicate the retrogressive and anti-intellectual character of the Stravinsky theories. I find it difficult to reconcile Mr. Edwin Evans's approbation of them with his admission that art should reflect life, for the whole of life cannot be set within the limits of the merely sensuous. Indeed, the more important elements are found outside those limits. If we are to use our orchestral colours much in the same way as a child uses his box of paints; if our deeper emotions are to remain unawakened; if we are to give up the superb architecture of the symphonic form for disjunct utterances and aimless repetitions; if development (and therefore climax) is to go by the board, then, surely, music will be thrown back into a state of de-civilization, and will cease to be a language capable of expressing the vital forces lying unseen in the heart of man. The Symphony for Wind Instruments fails to stir me in the slightest degree; this is not surprising, for sound *qua* sound no longer interests me. What does surprise me is the fact that the composer of *Petroushka* and *The Nightingale* could bring himself to pen so fatuous a work in conformity with the theories which have formed the subject of this article.

MODERN HUNGARIAN COMPOSERS

BY PHILIP HESELTINE

It is indeed good news that Béla Bartók intends to visit England during the present month, bringing with him a new Sonata for violin and pianoforte and other chamber music for performance in London.

We have now considerable justification for regarding London as the centre of the musical world, so far as performances are concerned. Thanks to the initiative of our concert-givers we are on the whole better acquainted with contemporary music than any other city in the world. Our own composers can no longer complain of undue neglect; and we are more familiar with the work of the most important living composers than Vienna or any of the musical centres of Germany. We are ahead of America in the variety and quantity of new works that are presented to our audiences every year, and ahead of France in our knowledge of any but purely French music. Yet there are strange gaps in this knowledge of ours, of which one of the largest and strangest is our almost total ignorance of the contemporary music of Hungary.

As long ago as 1903 Richter performed an early Symphony of Bartók's at Manchester (one movement alone—a Funeral March—has survived in print), but between that time and the outbreak of war practically nothing of this composer's work was heard in England. In the summer of 1914 some pianoforte pieces by Bartók and Kodály were performed at a concert given by Mr. Liebich in London, and Sir Henry Wood introduced Bartók's first Suite* for orchestra (composed in 1905) at a Promenade Concert in the same year. The war of course prevented the possibility of extending our knowledge of his works very much further, but it is surprising that during the last three years we in England have heard hardly anything of Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály (pronounced Kodai, the 'l' resembling that of the French word *mouillé*), and Laszlo Laitha—Hungary's three most distinguished living composers—save an occasional mention of their names in a musical newspaper. For whatever views one may hold as to the

Photo by

BÉLA BARTÓK (Irene Werner, Budapest.)

respective merits of modern composers, no serious students of the music of Bartók can deny that the power and originality it displays entitle him to at least as much consideration and respect as any composer living.

Last year's Promenade Concerts gave us only the rather immature Rhapsody for pianoforte and Orchestra which dates from 1904. But in the preceding season Sir Henry Wood revived the early but already, to some extent, characteristic Orchestral Suite with conspicuous success, and it is difficult to see why this virile and exhilarating work has never been repeated. Incidentally, there are few modern compositions that could be arranged for a military band with more brilliant effect than the opening movement of this Suite, with its long, march-like theme of a grandeur and sonority scarcely excelled in the *Meistersinger* Overture itself, with which it invites comparison.

* Published by Rózsavölgyi, Budapest.