THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY

VOL. VII APRIL, 1921 NO. 2

THE RHETORIC OF MODERN MUSIC

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THE four elements of musical style: rhythm, melody, harmony, and form—have occupied at one time or another, positions of varying importance in the development of music. To the historian who is concerned with the process of development, these elements appear to have originated in the order named, although the critical theorist cannot at once agree with so simple an explanation, for he finds it difficult to conceive of any musical thought without its embodiment in material form. The theorist must also consider the other elements so interdependent as to justify the belief that melody lies inherent in what appears to be the most simple rhythmic combination, and that harmony is implied in any melodic succession whatever.

At certain periods, however, one or more of these elements predominate. Rhythm, thus, is the outstanding feature of primitive music, as simple melody worn smooth by usage characterizes folk-music; while "poly-melody" is the very definition of polyphony. The classical period is so named largely because of its emphasis upon formal structure, although the change to an harmonic point of view was also important. Following parallel movements in literature and politics, music broke away from the classic tradition and entered a romantic period, which has continued to the present day in Realism, Symbolism, Impressionism, and other contradicting, centrifugal resultants of emotional Romanticism. Rhythm, color, and harmony are in the foreground, although the order of importance may vary with individual composers. In the last forty years all three have grown more dissonant.

Some, who do not object to the title "Conservatives" at such a time as this, deplore the invasion of crass rhythm, barbaric

color, and crashing harmonic dissonance, whether brutally realistic or subtly impressionistic. They sincerely believe that the modern extremists are on the direct road to barbarism. Others who have unbounded faith in the new "Freedom," believe that the field of Art is unlimited and that nothing is useless as art-material just as nothing in the physical world is entirely useless. Accordingly, they have hope even in the music of the Italian noise-machines.

The critic of modern music is at once confronted by this problem of the materials of the art, the harmonic vocabulary, and the melodic idiom. There is also the interesting question of an amalgamation of the new material with the old. The impression of unpleasantness sometimes resulting from a sudden juxtaposition of the two, may be due to the fact that we are living in a period when the new is strange in its newness, or this impression may be the result of inherent differences in the two processes. The juxtaposition is nowhere more apparent than in the music of certain lesser composers of the present day, who seem to have decided to insert a few modern idioms in an otherwise mid-Victorian composition. However, we may admit all the newest words in music so long as some listeners, other than the composer, understand the language. More important than problems of vocabulary is the consideration of form and especially of what may be called rhetoric, in the music of to-day and of the future.

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After only a superficial survey of modern music, emphasis upon form seems unwarranted. That it is about the last element mentioned in a characterization of the period is due in part to the fact that design is most successful when inconspicuous and unobtrusive. It is also due to a narrow conception of the meaning of the term. When "form" is mentioned, most musicians think only of the formal and arbitrary arrangements of the classical period and certain extremely conservative tenets of Bussler and Prout which were successfully modified by later romanticists and are now fortunately and properly relegated to the past. The impression that rhetorical design is relatively unimportant in modern music is furthered by the fact that some composers are so interested in the vocabulary they are using as to be oblivious to style.

On the other hand, a careful investigation will prove that rhetorical form is much more important than most observers

realize, and that the greatest composers of the present period are experts in style. Contemporary composers likely to be earliest forgotten, are those who are interested only in the magic legerdemain of the new musical vocabulary and who neglect the construction of a real message. It is scarcely necessary to emphasize the fact that great music is the result of a coöperation of the four musical elements. A composer lacking in rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic interest is subject to immediate criticism, although at any given moment in a composition it is not likely that all these are of prime importance. However, the expression of form, the stylistic rhetoric of music, is continuously important. The danger that some modern music may fail at this point is greater than that it may fall into rhythmic or harmonic chaos.

The best music of the nineteenth century is music in which there was an amalgamation of harmony and polyphony. Similarly in the twentieth century, the greatest music will be written when the modern harmonic vocabulary, combined with engaging color and rhythmic interest, expresses ideas with all the force of rhetorical form (using the term "form," as we have come to use the term polyphony in its freest and best sense).

Regard for rhetorical structure does not confine the composer to any specific forms such as the "Sonata-form." This emphasis upon fixed designs has done much to prejudice the study of true form. Although the purity of outline of the classical sonata is admired and compared to the formal beauty of Greek sculpture, the modern composer and the modern sculptor are not expected to confine themselves to these rather impersonal and static forms.

The Classical School, with its balanced phrases and emphasized cadential endings, wrote beautiful musical poetry, but to-day Scriabine and others have written in a style which more nearly approximates that of prose. This does not excuse the latter from an examination of their rhetorical style; in fact, rhetoric is even more important in prose than in poetry, because of the greater freedom of prose. In this comparison of modern music and prose forms, there is no intention to refer to the emotional content of prose and verse. Much that is, from a formal standpoint, musical prose, is extremely poetic; just as Tagore's prose is poetic. Much poetry is prosaic. Mendelssohn at times delighted in the niceties of formal "irregularities in regularity" somewhat as Dryden did, and will be read less and less, for the same reason. Beethoven, like Milton, became more deeply philosophic in his poetic style than Strauss succeeded in becoming

in "Also Sprach Zarathustra." It is extremely important that present-day composers face this fact and realize that the greatest criticism of the modern school as a whole, is its lack of depth. Superficial ideas are often expressed with elaborate means, but all the richness of harmony and orchestral color does not prevent the listener from realizing that the composer has no message. Some would say that the new idiom does not lend itself to anything but half-tone impressionism. Surely this is not the case. Modern composers should be able to express themselves with greater force because of their increased resources of vocabulary, instrumental color, and rhythmic variety. Some of the Russians are already doing so.

The secret of such expression is inherent in a complete conquest of its rhetorical aspects. This technique is not to be used in a conscious or arbitrary manner but as an unconscious element in the fluency of expression, for form should ever be the servant and not the master of ideas. This fluency of expression is absolutely essential for any logical statement of musical ideas and it is a prerequisite for intelligibility. That it is lacking may account for the incoherency of some modern music, although it is difficult to say in all cases whether it is the intelligence of the critic or of the composer which is deficient.

Formal intelligibility does not necessarily demand regularity in structure. In fact, the listener much prefers the subtle and involved, so long as there is a conviction of sincerity of utterance and inherent, if not expressed, form. One of the main reasons why Bach seems a very modern composer is the fact that he found freedom of rhetoric in his style and that his sentence structure is quite involved and gives Messrs. Prout and Brethren more problems in their mathematics than any other composer they attempt to analyze.

Too much emphasis should not be placed upon a demand for plain intelligibility even, as some composers, like Debussy, prefer to veil the indistinct outlines of their form, and deal in that literary style in which half the charm is the lack of plain statement. There is more promise in music of the *vers libre* type than in poetry of that description (although no art can find its main thoroughfare in this direction), for music can approach with safety nearer to truth which cannot be intelligibly translated in verbal symbols. On the other hand, it is well to point out that in the biological world, the higher the organism, the greater is its organization and that animals with strongest vertebrate systems are most important. Of all the arts, music by the very

evanescent character of the medium itself needs careful organization in its structure.

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Two divisions may be made of the problems of rhetorical structure in music: one concerned with the large form of the work and the other, the detailed form of the smaller units, the concurrent discourse of the musical idea. In modern music the latter tends to become the more important consideration. Composers have discovered that the large form of a work may assume any structure consistent with the type and mood of the composition, if they keep in mind a few fundamental principles of æsthetics, unity and variety, proportion and development. They may then turn their musical thought in almost any direction, so long as they say something, i. e. so long as there is coherency in the rhetorical statement of ideas. The fixed mold of a large form is no longer needed. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, literary programs and designs, descriptive of external objects, have often been used in the place of the classical models but even programs are unnecessary. While literature and nature will always stimulate the imagination of composers, they need not be called upon to furnish substitutes for formal design. When this is fully realized, a true renascence of absolute music *per se* will follow. That, after all, is the larger freedom. Many musical anarchists are hoping to find in program music an extreme realism. Why do they seek to be free of all harmonic and rhythmic restrictions only to enter a greater bondage!

The large form of his drama, in which musical themes are the sole protagonists, will be as free as the composer desires and its development will be limited only by the character of the ideas themselves. Nevertheless, it is always to be remembered that, however free in form his work may become, no composition can ever ultimately free itself from the necessity of form, because form will continue to be the penalty which everything must pay for the privilege of existing. The composer may manipulate the *dramatis personæ* in a musical plot as he pleases. His principal characters need not always be introduced at the opening of the work as they are in Sonata-form. The heroine, frequently the second theme of this form, need not be awaited expectantly at the closing pedal-point of a bridge-passage, with all the other characters on the stage looking toward her entrance. Stereotyped procedure of this sort may secure the expected applause in some theatres but it should not be a convention required in all

symphonies. There is no reason why the general atmosphere of the work should not be suggested by a long dialogue of secondary ideas or by an impressionistic scenic setting before any musical idea emerges in a principal rôle. Or even, as in G. B. Shaw, there may be no hero or heroine. Sometimes, the musical idea is gradually revealed in its true character and the work concludes with an apotheosis. There is much to be said in favor of saving the musical climax for the very end rather than placing it at the theoretically correct point, both in the classic literary drama and the musical symphony—at the end of the third act of five (i. e. at the end of Development and beginning of Recapitulation). Drama long ago, recognized this liberty and the necessity for metamorphosis and interaction among the characters until the final curtain, a fact which the recapitulation of the old sonata-form forgets. The "live-happily-ever-after" idea of a recapitulation with both themes in the tonic key, is rapidly giving place to more artistic and less stereotyped arrangements. In all of these matters, the composer should have complete freedom, consistent with his own idea.

The more important part of modern rhetorical style is the detailed consideration of "sentence" structure. This is inherently connected with the musical idea itself; one can scarcely say which is form and which idea: hence, its importance. At the present time with Rousseauistic philosophy rampant, any emphasis upon structure calls forth condemnation from those who believe that the "Inner Check" is of the Devil, that Decorum is responsible for all the sins of art, and Society for all the sins of the individual. Musicians of this belief will say that the theorist is, of course, quite willing to grant the composer harmonic freedom and even freedom in the large form, so long as he can fasten the servitude of sentence structure upon him.

It is the province of criticism in art or politics, to search for the Law that is higher than all laws. A recognition of the fallibility of human law and of the tendency of forms to become formalistic, does not imply the giving up of all standards and a return to chaos. The old idea of sentence-structure must be recast. Much of it comes from the days when music had more the rhythms of poetry than of prose, in which harmonic and melodic cadences had almost the effect of rhyme and when balance of phrases approximated verse-form. Some composers will continue to write in this style, in the future as in the past, but others have discarded this type of musical sentence, believing that there is no practical or theoretical reason why a musical thought, cast

in a musical sentence, should always close with an accepted dominant-tonic cadence. Many modern full closes are purely melodic or the feeling of weight is produced by other harmonic means, and these periodic closes are just as satisfactory. Musical punctuation does not depend upon harmonic cadences of a fixed pattern. It is indeed convenient in studying the music of some periods, to call a half-cadence a semi-colon or comma; a full cadence, a period; and interrupted or deceptive cadences, exclamation points, interrogation marks or dashes; but these same effects have been achieved in modern music in many other ways and just as unmistakably and successfully.

Again, the composer must bear in mind that, although there is no longer any need of harmonic cadences, he is not freed from all considerations of structure. Music must be just as intelligible a language and capable of just as much declamation as before, with even greater art. The performer cannot merely repeat words endlessly; he must punctuate and read into the music, the ideas of the composer. Therefore, a coherent rhetorical style is an essential, and more important to-day than ever. To prove that, in the work of great composers of the present, this rhetorical style is highly developed; that it is frequently lacking in others; and, in general, to analyze its processes, is an important field of investigation for the student of modern music.

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When an attempt is made to isolate the form of a composition and consider it apart from the spiritual content of music, the protest is often heard that cruel vivisection is being practiced; but it is only by some such laboratory method as this, that elements can be isolated and studied. Convenience, also, is the only excuse for the use of numerals as symbols. Those who oppose any systematic study of the subject are fond of pointing out the mathematical contradictions of certain theorists. That there have been differences of opinion in details of form, is no criticism of the study in general; rather is it to be expected in any consideration of the intricate structure of music. In the few examples which follow, other analyses may be held equally valid in detail. These are cited not in an attempt to cover the wide field suggested in the preceding paragraph, but as illustrating some features of sentence structure.

An interesting case of extremely elaborate rhythmic and harmonic material, coupled with extreme simplicity (one might

almost say, poverty) of form, may be considered in the analysis of Ornstein's small piano pieces "Poems of 1917." The adjective "small" is properly applied, for, gigantic technically, as has been the attempt to depict phases of the world-war in music, these pieces are all on small canvases and quite innocently regular in form. Hardly anything but regular four-measure phrases can be found from one end of the set to the other.

I. Introductory 2.
A Thesis 4: arsis 3 (producing effect of 4 by addition of a fermata).
A^x 4:4
A Same form as before.

II. A Thesis of two trimeters concluded by arsis of quatrimeter. The composer adds two measures to produce complete balance 6:6.
A^x 4:4
B 4:4
A Same as before.

III. A 4:4
A^x 4:4
A 4 quasi coda.

IV. A 4:4
A^x 4:5, 6, 6, 6, 7, 8 (cumulative extension but no real rhythmic irregularity).
A 4:4 Extended as above to 6 measures.

V. Introductory 4.
A 4
A^x 4 (condensed to 3 measures).
Concluding 4.

VI. A 4:4:4 (triple sentence).
B 4:4 (last measure extended by regular means, 2 measures).
A 4:4:2 (final quatrimeter suggested by a diameter).

VII. A 4:4 (continued one measure).
B 4:4:4
A 4 (continued two measures).

VIII. A 4:4 (cumulative extension of two measures)
B 4:4
Interlude 2
C 4:4 (extended three measures)
C^x 4:4
Interlude 1
C 4 (extended one measure)
A^x 4:4
4:4

IX. Introductory 5 measures.
Introductory accompaniment figure 2 measures.
A 4:4
A^x 4:4
Concluding accompaniment figure 2 measures.

X. Introductory 4
A 4:4
A^{x} 4:4
A^{xx} 4:4
Interlude 4
A 4:4
Coda 4:4 (with 2 measures regular extension).

Number eight of the set, which depicts actual warfare, appears to exhibit greater irregularity, but this is in content rather than in form. The formal digressions from regular quatrimeters are, in the main, repetitions of final measures to give the necessary periodic effect, formerly produced by harmonic means. So strong is Mr. Ornstein's feeling for regularity that he properly adds one measure of rest at the end of this number. If one still chooses to mean by "form," stereotyped regularity, it can be found here in greater frequency, perhaps, than in the compositions of Mozart. Toward this fact, the observer may take one of two attitudes: either this music is to be praised for its "purity" of form, or one may deplore the lack of rhetorical interest and wish that the composer had treated the involved subject of a world-war in less rigid musical phrases. One is inclined to miss, for instance, the surging rhetoric of the Chopin Preludes to which these compositions bear some resemblance. This is not intended as a criticism of melodic or harmonic material, in which there is much to interest the listener and to which he may turn his entire attention, probably as Mr. Ornstein intended he should.

Of greater interest from the rhetorical standpoint, are many of Cyril Scott's compositions, notably his Sonata for Pianoforte. They are illustrative also of a skillful use of new methods of punctuation other than the simple repetition or extension of a final measure for periodic effect, noticed in Ornstein. Scott's "Garden of Soul-Sympathy" is quite clear in form although it changes time-signatures in almost every measure and is more subtly irregular than Mr. Ornstein's set.[1]

The ten Pianoforte Sonatas of Alexander Scriabin constitute an excellent illustration of the development of newer methods of

[1]The first eight measures are in delicately balanced structure. Then follows a complementary phrase of the form 1, 2, 2, 3, 4 and three measures of cadenza-like material concluded by three of changing harmonies. Bar lines are as much a hindrance in the analysis of Scott as they evidently were in the composition itself. For instance, these last three measures have the "weight" of two, as does also the "cadenza." This closes the first section, A. Now a contrasted theme, B, in regular 8-measure outline. Then B reappears in 3/8 time—regular, if we consider one measure of 6/8 inserted as two of 3/8. The final A is interesting as it shows more of the growth which gives interest to rhetoric. The last two measures are twice repeated with changing harmonies and then the final measure itself, still changing color, is repeated three times and a snatch of B brings the number to a close.

sentence structure and punctuation. The first three Sonatas, written somewhat in the style of Brahms, Chopin and Schumann, respectively, are orthodox in structure. In the fourth Sonata, a change has been made to a newer harmonic vocabulary but each sentence still ends with the dominant-tonic cadence, though this is often disguised by appoggiaturas, suspensions and over-lapping. In the fifth Sonata not a single sentence ends with a full cadence. The impression of conclusion upon the main tonality, however, is usually produced in this sonata and in those immediately following, by the use of a part of the tonic harmony with added notes. Gradually, with increased daring and the growth of his vocabulary, the methods of sentence structure and punctuation become much freer and more varied. Even in the last Sonatas, however, not only the large form but also the detailed rhetoric is extremely clear and in the main surprisingly regular.

An analysis of the methods by which Scriabin and other modern composers achieve this clarity of form and coherency of rhetoric would involve detailed treatment at some length, but an investigation of the form of the best modern music, with a consideration of the newer rhetoric, should answer any criticism on that score. Rhetoric is only a means to an end, however, and modern composers have yet to convince many that they have a message of lasting worth. While the theorist must acknowledge the relative unimportance of form in itself, yet it is difficult to think of form apart from content, and an eloquent and forceful rhythmic rhetoric should free and inspire expression.