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Schonberg and His Modernism

By Felix Borowski

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IT HAS BEEN one of the fortunate qualities of Arnold Schonberg's music that audiences have rarely been able to hearken to it without having dreadful emotions engendered in their collective souls. This is, to be sure, fortunate only for Mr.

Schonberg, who, when his listeners are moved to pommel each other and to cry aloud in violent bitterness, receives much advertising that is none the less effective because it has cost not a penny to obtain.

For the first time in America Schonberg was given representation as an orchestral composer at the concert presented by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra yesterday. It will probably bring bitter disappointment to him when he learns that

his Five Pieces for Orchestra occasioned no riot in Orchestra Hall. These inspirations—presumably that is the word which the composer would apply to them—have never failed of an antagonistic reception whenever and wherever they have been set forth. Even in London they were hissed. There was no hissing yesterday. Yet it will give Mr. Schonberg's sensibilities an uncomfortable jolt when he is informed that a large proportion of the gathering which listened to the Five Pieces was consumed with laughter.

For the most part this merriment was of that polite but uncomfortable description which seeks to give merely inward expression to its amusement. Many listeners held their programmes before their faces and shook convulsively. Only when some noise more grotesque than usual proceeded from the orchestra did they gasp and gurgle audibly. Once, however—it was at the conclusion of the fourth piece—the audience laughed unanimously, and a gentleman in the gallery, who found that Mr. Schonberg's efforts to please demanded some extraordinary manifestation from him, whistled through his fingers.

It must not be believed, however, that the consensus of public opinion was on the side of the composer of the new work. Even during the progress of the music one or two people rose solemnly in their seats and departed in majestic dudgeon; but the burden of general condemnation was placed on the shoulders of Mr. Schonberg during the intermission—that period of the concert in which reputations are made, or the reverse.

If the history of music teaches nothing else it teaches critics that if they cannot be correct they should invariably be careful. Composers who have often made fools of themselves during their existence here on earth have sometimes, through the medium of their works, made posthumous fools of their reviewers. The case of Richard Wagner is classical. The pleasant execrations which were bestowed upon Arnold Schonberg yesterday were but repetitions of the abuse which once was offered to the composer of "Die Walkure." Wagner, whose constitution happily was not as weak as he imagined it was, lived to see scorn turned to hearty admiration. Not all "futurists" have been as lucky. When Robert Schumann came to his frightful and tragic end in the madhouse at Emdenich, near Bonn, there were countless connoisseurs of art who declared that they had predicted it many years before.

Will Mr. Schonberg's music some day be filled with beauty for those whose ears are attuned to listen for it? I think not. Yet even if there are qualities of charm in the Five Pieces for Orchestra which may reveal themselves to the supermen who may succeed this imperfect generation, it is not the province of this review to concern itself with so distant and inappreciable a thing. A technical treatise might, perhaps, be written upon Schonberg's notions of harmony, and the possibility of their ultimate acceptance by the world, but this is not the time and certainly it is not the place to set it down.

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If there is anything more utterly monstrous, more hideous and more artistically squallid than the music which Mr. Stock and his performers gave forth when they performed Schonberg's Five Pieces yesterday, it can only be some other composition by their creator or by one of his disciples. To regard the music in any other light must first of all involve the abjuration of every principle of beauty that has been known to composers since music was an art. Harmony and a tonality, as those things are understood of all the people, are something entirely different in Mr. Schonberg's scheme. A cat walking down the keyboard of a piano could evolve a melody more lovely than any which came from the Viennese composer's inner consciousness.

It is, indeed, possible that although Schonberg's ideas of music are utterly at variance with those of all sane people, his orchestral technique may open up fresh fields to composers who are searching for new effects. There are many new effects in the Five Pieces, and although it was often precisely those things which moved Mr. Stock's listeners to stuff pocket handkerchiefs into their mouths and to roll helpless with laughter in their seats, they were frequently not without a certain fascination of their own.

Considering that he is a self-taught musician, Schonberg has gone wonderfully far in the acquisition of technique. His orchestral writing, however grotesque it must have sounded to unfamiliar listeners, is remarkable indeed. That which he demanded of instrumentalists had, in many cases, never been demanded of them before.

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It is to be presumed that the Chicago Symphony Orchestra interpreted the Five Pieces without a flaw. To the average listener, if Mr. Stock's performers had played the music in a condition of helpless intoxication and had delivered themselves of anything that had come into their heads first, the results of Schonberg's inspiration would have sounded much the same. At least every one, when each movement came to a sudden and unexpected end, finished at the same moment, and this fortuitous circumstance implied that the general ensemble was all that could have been desired.

Mr. Stock, an admirable humorist, prefaced his sensational novelty with Beethoven's first symphony, and he followed it with the second symphony by Brahms. As a means of proving that Mr. Schonberg is an extremely eccentric composer, the contrast between the eminently sane and even ingenuous early symphony by Beethoven and the eminently insane attributes of the Five Pieces, fulfilled all that could have been asked of it. Moreover, those people who had looked askance at the second symphony of Brahms, and who had been accustomed to mumble something about "schoolmasters" and "pedantic contrapuntalists" when they discussed the Hamburg master in their secret souls, fell figuratively prone before his genius yesterday. Mr. Schonberg's medicine was bitter, but it was salutary, too. As for the playing of the symphonies—it was ravishing to every ear.