

POLITICAL MUSIC

The Premiere of Schoenberg's "Ode to Napoleon"

By Kurt List

THE coinage of the phrase "intellectual irresponsibles" concerns creative artists to a greater degree than any other group of the practicing intelligentsia. The art work of musicians, if restricted to mere tonal expressions free from any literary program, defies a political evaluation completely. Consequently, the personal political belief and action of the composer are made the decisive criterion upon which to classify his music in regard to its social value. All over the world, from Soviet Art Commissars to poetic Washington librarians, the intellectual membership card is the determinant of good and bad in the spheres of the more abstract arts.

But when a composer has managed to escape the specifically political gestures in the past, which once was considered an outstanding virtue, he is now compelled to adorn his opus with a title pregnant with actuality. If he does not do so, he will be accused of being a slacker, an accusation which in the long run may lead to his being completely banned from the repertoire. In keeping with this trend the American League of Composers together with the New York Philharmonic commissioned seventeen contemporary composers to write from two to five-minute symphonic pieces dealing with the subject of the war. The result of this ready-made ideological order was dismal. What came out, so far, were a few inferior musical works, written in haste, crowded into the allotted time space, imitative of some outer noise, and embellished with titles taken from a patriotic highschool student's vocabulary. Thus neither music nor propaganda was aided to any degree.

On the other hand, many artists have without doubt been sincerely moved by the contemporary upheaval and attempted to express their feelings which went beyond the limited artistic field, in some grandiose protest in the very field of art. That even the most sincere attempts resulted in flashy but shallow works was largely due to what may be called the "poster conception." It is possible that the present struggle does not involve any issues going further than immediate demands of power politics. In this case it is obvious that the arts, expressions of the intangible feelings of comparatively eternal values, were entirely out of their medium in lending only their technical applications but not their essential function of expressing the unspeakable, to very earthy and up-to-date postulates.

After all, if seen divested of later glorification, Michelangelo's paintings at the Sistine Chapel were nothing but poster art for the Catholic Church. But the issues contained there reached further than the immediate demand: "Come to church, pay your tithe and pray." They were issues which involved man's immortal soul, his striving for another, a better world, and they hinged rather strongly on the emotionally involved family situation of parent and son, guidance and follower, problems which so far have proved as lasting. And precisely this untimeliness and grandeur of the issues represented could make the paintings of Michelangelo into great works of art.

BUT it is much more probable that while the war of today centers around problems no less important, deep-going and eternal, than those of the Renaissance, the artists of today are absolutely incapable of grasping the profundity of these very issues which to express artistically would be their chief function. There is a mushroom-like growth of commercialism in all branches of the arts. There are also official directions of what shall and shall not be said in the work to satisfy the propaganda desires of those who see in the arts nothing but a pleasant device to smuggle convenient ideologies into the mind of the public. Both have forced everybody, including the artists, into a pattern of behavior and belief which is as true to life and the inner ideas of one of the most vigorous battles of humanity, as Walter Huston resembles Ambassador Davies.

When the human being becomes universally known as General Issue, it can hardly be surprising that a man whose first name is invariably Joe is expected to behave always and every place as described in a script. But once that it is accepted by a vast majority of the population that every American soldier, trapped by a German contingent, breaks out into the most fanatical and best-styled speech about all problems confronting the State Department, the artist does not feel free to remove the subject matter of his art from the general cliché even if he himself has not accepted intellectually the infectious germ of monotony. The freedom of the artist is the essence of his art, is what partly makes his art; once regimented, whether by command or by social habit, it ceases to be art because it has ceased to be free.

Now Arnold Schoenberg, uncompromising composer of the most radical of all of modern music, has created a work which, for the first time in his life, gives literary expression to his political credo. If any new motion in the arts, or better if any art at all, could attract attention in these times of rapid decrease of humanist

values, then this work should have created a sensation. For here we have a composer who has never followed the general taste but who in his search for truth has remained alone and unbowed for many a decade. Is his "Ode to Napoleon," performed by the New York Philharmonic last week, an addition to the scores of political music which is neither political in the sense of the real issue nor music as individual expression? Or has the composer of so many revolutionizing works found the formula which so far has been missing?

All the outer details of the creative procedure of this work bear close resemblance to similar enterprises. Schoenberg has chosen a poem of Byron which does not belong to his best. Jotted down under the immediate impression of Napoleon's death, the poet, still deeply impressed by the monumental figure of the French emperor, condemns his lust for tyranny and at the end juxtaposes the American revolution and its resultant democracy to the lust of the autocrat.

"Yes—one—the first—the last—the best—
The Cincinnatus of the West,
Whom envy dared not hate,
Bequeath'd the name of Washington,
To make man blush there was but one!"

The parallel to Hitler is clear. Even more so is the democratic solution. It is not new to draw artistic inspiration for the present from past history. The Russians, from *Alexander Nevsky* to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, have done so *ad nauseam*. In the music Schoenberg uses cliché devices like the insipid quotation of Beethoven's *Victory* theme. What then, if at all, he makes this work different from all previous creations done with the intention to evoke a spirit embodying the present social situation?

TO understand the significance of this work, extending beyond the importance of one work of a great composer, one must understand the meaning of Schoenberg's life work. Whatever Schoenberg has done and thought is the work of a non-conformist. More than thirty years ago he wrote: "I hope my pupils will search! Because they will know that one searches only to search; that to find is the goal but that it may easily become the end of all striving. Our time searches for much. But above all, it has found one thing: comfort . . . It is easy to possess a world view when one only looks at what is pleasant and does not contemplate the rest; the rest being the essence . . . Comfort as world-view! As little motion as possible, no shock. Who love comfort that much will never search where they are not certain to find something."

The man who wrote these words—and his entire book on harmony is pervaded by the same spirit—was certainly a political human being. Not in the sense of a ward heeler of the Republican Party, but in the intention to better the world in whatever field he may find his vocation. Music is Schoenberg's vocation; and a political musician he has remained.

But had he never written the above words, had he never given expression to one single intellectual thought, he still would have been a political musician. The man who wrote music which he found to be true

as his own expression and as the only possible expression of his times, in spite of continuous persecution on the part of the academicians; a man who never desisted from his musical path in spite of the strongest recriminations by dictatorial and reactionary governments, is, indeed, a political musician. The pursuit of his own way and the search for truth in musical creation made him a political figure in his field. We value Beethoven as a revolutionary musician not because he once tore up a dedication to the tyrannical Napoleon, nor because as a perverted music criticism stated "he represented the rising bourgeoisie," but because he followed in his art what he believed and what history later proved to be the right path.

In this very same sense Schoenberg is a political being. The two antipodes of political music today, Strauss and Shostakovich, possess very little of this political character. Shostakovich adapts his musical style to the wishes of a demanding government. This makes him music politician. Strauss continues to write in his antiquated style of thirty years ago and is also alleged to have Nazi sympathies. That makes him a poor musician so far as the past thirty years are concerned and it also makes him an individual whose philosophy is alien to anybody believing in freedom.

But both composers are not political in our essential sense. Neither has embarked on a course which can be a basis for a further desirable evolution. If Strauss and Shostakovich are political then they are so only as reactionaries. Not because of their respective party affiliations, but because, for whatever the reasons may be, they have reverted to a musical style which as means of creation has long outlived its possibilities.

Schoenberg's attempt at political art in the "Ode" is naive, but it is, among other things, an expression of his private view on world affairs. Had it meant a compromise of his style it would fall into the same category as all the other "political" works. As it is, his music is as political as all his previous music. It is still searching for its own true expression and for its place in the historical evolution of all music. To those who know nothing about Schoenberg's person, it may be a source of joy to find out that the man who writes great music is also an anti-fascist. However, his "Ode" is but another of his great compositions.

It is true that Schoenberg has not found the formula of incorporating the real issues of today in his art. That is not his fault. Modern art has tended toward abstraction more and more in the past decades. Until this development has come to an absolute standstill and until great social changes determine new conceptions, abstraction will be the *modus vivendi* of the arts. What Michelangelo was able to do, because the arts of his times tended toward the representative, seems impossible today. For this reason intellectual responsibility will consist of being faithful to one's own and not to an official or mass intellect. Political art will retain its accent on art as long as present politics persist. In a different future, when politics and art will mean living by all, there will be no need to cry in frantic hysteria for what now seems an irreconcilable contradiction.

Whither Spain?

By Diego Martinez Barrio

THE Spanish Committee of Liberation was organized in order to defend the principles of the Constitution of 1931, which represents the last legal expression of the Spanish people. As soon as the Constitution of 1931 is once more in force, the people will be given the right to say what changes should be made in the government of Spain. When they have spoken in the elections, all Spaniards will accept the decision. The elections will prevent a new Civil War, something which ought to be generally avoided but would constitute a crime for the Spain of today. I want to add that Spain cannot now take the place which Turkey held in the 19th century; Spain must not become "the problem" for the European democracies.

The parties which have joined the Committee of Liberation hope to avoid Civil War and to reestablish the Republic peacefully. As a step in this direction we are summoning a meeting of the Republican Cortes in Mexico for January 10, 1945.

The task of the Cortes will be to reestablish Constitutional order in line with what is prescribed by the Constitution itself. As a result of the meeting of the Cortes, a government representing the legal will of the Republic will come again into existence. This



Barrio

government will ratify its adherence to the cause of the United Nations.

From 1931 until the disappearance of the Republic, Spain had a liberal and democratic government. The people of Spain aspire to see that liberal and democratic regime reestablished. Unfortunately, the people of this great North American democracy do not know the problems which faced Spain, because they never knew those institutions which were the cause of the suffering of the Spanish people. North America never knew feudalism and those institutions through which the land was concentrated in the hands of a few and who thereby controlled also the political power of the nation. Moreover, the United States has had tolerant churches who have not attempted to engage in politics. The situation in Spain is exactly the opposite. In Spain the Catholic Church has intervened actively in the civil life of the people. The United States has, also, never known the traditions of tyrannical absolutism as has Spain. These forces have sympathized and have worked actively with the fascist forces of Hitler and Mussolini.

True Spaniards everywhere are trying to free themselves of these tyrannical forces and to become incorporated as a western democratic nation with those liberties common to all modern peoples, and we are asking that the democratic peoples shall aid us to establish these liberties, or at least not to hinder our efforts. Spain was deprived of its legal government through the intervention of Hitler and Mussolini. When they are overthrown, it seems cruel that democratic governments should aid General Franco to consolidate this international crime.