

ms essay

Twelve-Tone Technique and Classicism
By Ernst Krenek (Los Angeles)

If historical parallels are allowed, it would seem that Schoenberg's position today has much in common with that of Johann Sebastian Bach at the end of the 1740s. At that time Bach was not widely regarded as a prophet opening up new avenues for the development of music, but rather as a composer who tenaciously vlung to the aesthetic and technical ideals of the past and spent his uncontested mastery in perfecting a style that had become obsolete. There are more than a few observers and commentators in our day who think very much the same about Schoenberg. It is especially the addicts of neo-classicism who entertain the notion that the ideas of atonality and twelve-tone technique had a certain, though limited character of progressiveness in Vienna between 1910 and 1920, but that the outside world since had moved on to the newer and simpler tenets of neo-classicism, which supposedly represented a more advanced phase in the development of the art.

In terms of our historical comparison these commentators would ply the part of the promoters of the stile galant, as it was expressed in the Mannheim School and other similar movements of the mid-eighteenth century. These artists too advocated a drastic simplification of the style of composition, over against the tremendous complexity of Bach's polyphony. The parallel may be carried still a little further. The representatives of the rococo ideal of simplicity and playfulness rejected Bach, because they obviously noticed only the contrapuntal texture of his work, which to them seemed to prove his devotion to the values of the past. They were not able to perceive in the boldness of his harmonic procedure that was to become the main vehicle of progress in the tonal music of the following hundredandfifty years. It was only when Haydn took up daring harmonic experimentation and Mozart re-introduced polyphonic thinking into the new style that this manner of writing became adapted to something more significant than "galant" daintiness.

Similarly those who nowadays criticize Schoenberg and his school as old-fashioned seem to consider only the romantic flavor of that music while they have no appreciation of the newness of the constructive ideas which are expressed in the twelve-tone technique. To be sure, the neo-classicists do not overlook the intellectual quality of that contribution, but they see in it a decadent, purely cerebral aftermath of romantic exuberance, while they believe to have discovered in their neo-classical methods a new principle of vitality.

It is here that the historical parallel comes to an end. The question whether the neo-classical camp will produce a Haydn and Mozart to raise the level of their utterance above that of busy indifference is futile. So far neo-classicism has not yet evolved any new principle of musical organization that could be compared with that of the sonata, which was the essential achievement of the post-Bachian simplifiers of music. They at least made no attempts at restoring, for instance, the modal idiom of the sixteenth century, whereas many of our present-day "modernists" concern themselves with a revival of past manners of writing at least as far distant from our own time as that of Palestrina from Stamitz.

Since the admittedly arbitrary way of looking at history in terms of sections marked off by neat figures with two zeros at the end invites contemplating a century as a unit, it is likely that some day our century will be considered in this light, and since we have nearly reached the mid-century mark it is of some interest to speculate whether in music it will be known as a predominantly classical or romantic century. Although neo-classicism and atonality seem to be separated by an unbridgeable gap, it may well be that the general character of the century will be recognized as being classical rather than romantic. Although atonality is usually regarded as the ultimate consummation of chaos, and thus the completion of romantic disorganization, it may look different from a distance. If we nowadays think of Beethoven as a classicist, we do so not because of a certain superficial daintiness and rococo-like playfulness of some of his early works, but rather because of the universal significance of his entire oeuvre and because of the terrific concentration and constructive unification of the compositions of his late period, which to

his contemporaries and many conventional observers of a later time appeared to be a romantic aberration, or perhaps a forward looking giving-in to the trend of the age.

In the development of our contemporary music a somewhat reverse movement may be seen. While atonality doubtlessly has brought to a climax the anti-constructive, chaotic tendencies of romanticism and impressionism, it has at the same time in the twelve-tone technique generated the most severe discipline imposed upon music in a long while. Therein lies an aspect of classicity, and if the basic ideas of that technique will be accepted by many composers, it is likely that they will inform our century with a flavor of genuine, new classicism, while the neo-classicism so popular during the last twentyfive years will rather be remembered as a flare-up of romantic inclinations, because it involves a revival of the past, in spite of its apparently progressive anti-romantic striving for unemotional, non-dramatic, streamlined matter-of-factness.

The fact that many young composers all over the world occupy themselves with the methods of the twelve-tone technique indicates that it has the makings of a "common practice". In order to recommend itself as a basis for common practice, an artistic procedure must be clear, easy to understand, all-inclusive and flexible. The first two criteria are required so that the procedure in question may become a subject matter of instruction. In order to be accepted by many, a procedure must be communicable and teachable, that is, the average teacher must be able to understand and to explain in precise technical terms what it consists of, and to control without hesitation whether the pupil has mastered the elements of the technique. The second pair of criteria is necessary in order to make its mastery worth anybody's while. If the objective of a technique is limited and its methods too rigid for being applied to the unpredictable requirements of the creative mind, it will not attract many followers beyond those particularly interested in the special situations covered by that technique.

The twelve-tone technique as formulated by the early commentators on the work of the Schoenberg school answers the first two requirements. It is clear and easy to understand. The notion that it is a sort of higher mathematics accessible only to Einsteinian minds is utter nonsense. For being acceptable as a vehicle of common use, however, its early formulation is perhaps too special and too rigid. This does not mean that its actual application in the works of Schoenberg and his followers is so.

The rigidity of that formulation is mainly due to the principle that the twelve-tone row has to be constantly used as an indivisible unit. As soon as we progress to the understanding that the basic idea of the twelve-tone technique is the construction of a tightly knit network of motivic relationships to be derived from any specific selection of tonal patterns (so that the complete twelve-tone row is but one special case among many), we shall achieve that flexibility of procedure which makes the technique a universally useful instrument of musical expression. The way toward this goal is indicated, though perhaps not explicitly expressed in some of the works of the composers mentioned above. So far, it has not yet been sufficiently studied and theoretically discussed.

In my "Studies in Counterpoint" (New York, 1940) I have attempted to present an elementary of the "special" (or "classical") twelve-tone technique, according to the earlier theoretical interpretations of that method of composition. In an article in The Music Review (May 1943) I have described some of the processes leading to the concept of a more "general" twelve-tone technique, such as I have applied in several compositions completed during the last few years. I hope to be able to work out in the near future a more systematic presentation of this theory for teaching purposes.