

Introductory Remarks at the Concert at the School of Design,  
Chicago, Illinois, February 19, 1944  
by Ernst Krenek

I happily agree with Mr. Moholy-Nagy's calling me an old friend of the School of Design and I am glad to reaffirm my sympathy for this institution by appearing here today. I am equally happy to understand that the present concert is meant to be the first in a series of similar occasions in which those interested in the adventures of contemporary music shall be made acquainted with the various phases of that music.

Today's program seems to be a very appropriate one to open such a project inasmuch as it presents examples of two of the most significant trends in modern music, though rather unevenly distributed as far as quantity goes, but even that reflects rather tellingly the situation prevailing in contemporary music.

Five of the items on our program represent various shadings of a style that frequently has been associated with the concept of neo-classicism. The most significant piece in this group is Strawinsky's Piano Sonata, not only because it is one of the earliest examples of that trend, but it also has remained one of the most accomplished ones. It is easy to see after what model the ideal of that style has been fashioned. The opening of the second movement is an almost literal quotation of the beginning of Bach's well-known French Suite in G major. It is a mooted question whether the prevaillingly percussive treatment of the piano, the matter-of-fact presentation of the thematic material and the dryness of the whole are characteristics derived from a historically authentic interpretation of the Bach style, or whether these are rather features that appeared desirable to Strawinsky and his followers as attributes of their own new style, and perhaps they only wanted to project them onto a historical background. At any rate, the sonata is a highly original work precisely in that it constantly conjures up recollections of past styles, twisting them into new contexts. In this respect connoisseurs of modern art will easily be reminded of the procedures of surrealism.

The Fantasy by the young American composer, Ross Lee Finney, is similarly reminiscent of structural and textural characteristics of Bach's toccatas. Finney, however, does not go as far as Strawinsky in forcing the old features into new and unexpected contexts. His musical discourse is rather flavored by elements of 19th century romanticism and allows for more *espressivo* in the traditional sense than Strawinsky does.

The three piano pieces by the Mexican, Carlos Chavez, sound more modern, in the sense of current parlance, inasmuch as they present a more jagged outline and aggressive dynamic details and dissonant tone-combinations. It is rather their lack of *espressivo* that associates them with neo-classical tenets. The second piece is instructive in demonstrating the limitations of the recipe.

Little need to be said about the pieces by Milhaud and Martinu, which show the applications of modern traditionalism in the lighter vein.

Milhaud has added a few more to the comprehensive series of his compositions exploiting Latin-American idioms. Martinu, the contemporary Czeck composer, has done the same with Czeck folklore material, at least so we assume since we are informed of his nationality. I personally must admit that if some one would point out to me that those pieces are paraphrasing harvest dances of the Hopi Indians I would be equally convinced. It seems quite paradoxical that the modern emphasis on indigenous musical materials has produced a rather uniform international style in which the personal characteristics of individual composers are likely to be blotted out.

It is my own sonata that alone on this program represents a different concept of music, that is the one that at times has been associated with the idea of expressionism. In parenthesis, I wish to correct a printer's error in the program. My sonata was completed in 1943, not in 1934, so that it really is the most recent work on our program. From my previous remarks it may be gathered that I feel that expressive intensity and emotional content are the main characteristics of that style, as distinguished from the propensity of the neo-classicists toward what they call objectivity. For reasons which to explain would require a full-length lecture, expressionistic music has become known as intellectual and artificially computed. Suffice it here to say that the fact that a composer has applied certain contrapuntal devices or has even used a special arrangement of the twelve tones as a technical point of departure has not the slightest bearing upon the emotional and expressive qualities of his work, and consequently incidental information about such facts should not influence the listener's reaction upon hearing such music.

For those interested in such matters I offer the remark that my sonata is based only slightly on such technical procedures as have been used in the original Twelve-Tone Technique. The first movement is a Sonata allegro with two themes, built up of four similar sections, all of which include developmental processes. This procedure can be found in several of Beethoven's late sonatas and quartets. The second movement consists of variations that alternate with brief canons, the latter easily identifiable by a characteristic trill motive that opens each canon. The third movement, a very brief concentrated scherzo, with a more quiet middle section, and the concluding Adagio are hardly in need of further comment.

In conclusion I may say that the expressionistic style, as which we may designate it lacking a better term, keeps alive the romantic tendency toward expressive intensity, in the belief that music without that is not very significant, and tries to integrate this tendency with the complexity and logic of construction inherited from the classicists, especially Beethoven.

Of course, the present program gives only a very limited cross-section through the large and variegated matters of modern music, but as such it may prove interesting and stimulating, and I hope you will find it so.