

A century

of contemporary music,

according to Alexandre Tissier

Almost a century ago, the atonal music was getting born in Vienna, which was then going to generate the dodecaphonic music, and afterwards, serial and post-serial music.

Not any music had ever so much transformed the very structure of the creating act of composition, or bumped into the traditional way of listening, neither caused such controversies.

So will a lot of violent postures and various manifestos stretch along the music of the twentieth century.

The first half of the century has accomplished the extremely rich passage from tonal to atonal music, from atonal music to dodecaphonic music with Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg, and then to Anton Webern's serial music, which will open the way to the next composers : afterwards, the second half of the century has been the time, and especially today, of very much more difficult ways.

Such composers as Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio and Karlheinz Stockhausen are first briefly exploring, each one in his own manner, the serial field, just before the post-serial field leads them to a very personal interpretation of the musical vocabulary and grammar's evolution.

In a second time, the musical language, made free from the serial authority, will reveal, with Boulez and Berio, new horizons of whom their writing had been containing the seeds : while, during the same time, Stockhausen is making the post-serial exploration collapse.

Where are we now ?

Have the 20's composers been able to give a straightforward continuation to the teachings of the new music ? What are the ways opened to modern music, in a world where a mass market may come for every music except contemporary music ?

To all these questions, composer Alexandre Tissier seeks for answering elements.

How do the possible paths for a young composer get organizing, facing the numerous streams of the current creation ?

When I started to get interested in so called modern music, I personally had to face a double problem.

On the left hand, there was a musical expression combining all the pieces from the Viennese School – Berg, Schoenberg and Webern –, and the accents of their language remaining strangers to a classical musical sensitivity, were like the classical, historical and undifferentiated part, of a musical modernity.

On the right hand, in addition to this body of shapes that were to me as theoretically as practically enigmatic – because the old knowledge, as well as

the current one, has not been able to carry out results -, there was all a contemporary part of the musical creation, that was bringing together a fragmented whole of various streams from which the languages, as well as the dialectical and harmonical impact, and the circumstances in which they had been conceived, were also verging on the unreachable.

So there was both collision and collusion, into an immediate present, between the recent forms of one kind of contemporary music, and those conceived and elaborated by composers all dead for half a century at least.

Very few contemporary pieces were belonging to assimilated forms of previous languages. Only the 20's composers generation was able to carry out the consequences of the mutations that occurred in language during the previous century.

That situation is both psychologically and technically uncomfortable and disturbing, for many reasons, for every composer from today really caring of this heritage.

What must be of prime importance, in ones method to approach modern music, to build a formal and musical conscience ?

At first, it is essential, for a composer driven by curiosity and by the desire to know contemporary music, to consider the whole corpus of roots from the music of his time.

Looking at the whole area of the music possibilities of existence and of active representations, and at the intimacy of the musical language, he is executating, in the worst case, and without the will of it, an inventory of the various trajectories of the music of his time ; and in the best case, he'll capture the elements and the accents of the musical thought, which, eventhough it is led by a very intuitive way of perception, has to be thought, analysed, and also, dreamt. For this second step, there is no receipe ready for use.

The only certainty is that the invention, and a composer's power of imagining, must walk through, and over, his predecessors works.

For the composers who were born in the 20's, and who discovered the Viennese School in the 40's, it meant not only understanding the atonality, and Berg's and Schönberg's dodecaphony, but also the serial music of Webern, who obviously was the composer on who this generation had focused.

Nevertheless, they tried to assimilate Webern through forms of which the understanding should not have been only about grammar, or only about the serial operation :

for the following composers generation, it should have meant continuing, accompany, and exceed, both concerning content and shape, the area of first pieces such as *Le marteau sans maître* by Boulez, or Stockhausen's *Gruppen*. Anyway, there is a delay and a problem in the assimilation of substance and form of an attitude in composing, concerning the reasons and the results of more than a century of music, and consequently, concerning the pursuit of musical purposes, and concerning their tranformation, after more than a century.

Today, what are the consequences of the formally unsifficient evolution of modern music by young composers ?

It has been bringing about a lack of knowledge as far as the music of their time is concerned, but, furthermore, of the deep mechanisms in music's construction. Then, no need to say that the most advanced works among them are not even the precondition of an atonal material's interpretation, or serial, or post-serial, and that their pieces remain in the state of premisses or sketches.

And the teaching institutions they belong to, and which sometimes don't even give them the knowledge they could use or ask for, are not even able to orientate them to some more structured forms of the twentieth century's music teaching. These institutions prefer giving up this responsibility to a unique personality, qualified about teaching or about composition, who will be indistinctly in charge of everything.

This personality may be very interesting : currently at the CNSM of Paris, Emmanuel Nunès, Marco Stroppa and Frédéric Durieux, are putting together the diversity and the ability in the musical attitudes, like never before in the history of an academic teaching institution.

However, considering the impossibility of teaching from the basics to the most complex forms of an artistic and technical attitude that should be based on the major composition works that came to our knowledge through the century, nothing can show any structured conscience of a high leveled pedagogical organisation.

Do we have to think that the historical future of the musical writing, and of a tradition of modernity, is condemned ?

This is more difficult to evaluate precisely.

But at the first sight, we have to say that it has never existed, in all the history of music, such musical pluri-stylistic shapes disguised in contemporary art, that house of complacency trying to conceal its own formal ignorance, and its inability, like never before, of any sensitive neither intuitive interpretation of the directions of the musical art. This is the great novelty of the times of pseudo-modernity.

In the former times, conservatism was unloading various implausible under-products that it intended to give as a culture, and the question of belonging to a modernist or passeist musical stream was not the subject of such a confusion. The matter of an achieved musical aesthetic's creation, was, at first, calling out to the collective conscience of the musicians, to find out the way to its own achievement, thanks to the work of the best of them !

No such thing is occurring with the current postmodern roots of music, whose successive strata are becoming the mutant area of a culture originating the confusions into the uses of technics and thoughts, to which every young composer of today appears to be submitted.

What would be the required means, to reorientate the current music into ways where a studied conception of thinking and of writing would assimilate the evolutions of a whole century ?

Besides the towering work of inventory to be made on the music of the first and

second halves of the century, we should rethink and reorganize the place and the forms through which the so-called contemporary music is given to be seen. In the concert halls, the musical direction should intelligently bring together the difference of close or far-off pieces, so that the concert would be a favoured moment, focused, in quantity and quality, for listening.

This, necessitates from the organizers a structured knowledge of the forms of music, even though the effects of a deep musical direction work remain subterranean. But as far as this is concerned, following the times fashion, they don't have any musical skill. They just get themselves reporting this musical patchwork of which they feign to be the moving spirits.

Where, by the way, are the watchful observers of the music of the time ? Where are the committed musicologists, where are the capable and informed journalists, where are the enlightened and curious media ? Nowhere.

The concert should be a moment of intensity, of information, of spreading and of understanding of a work and of many various types of works. And this would transform until the very meaning with which the pieces would be received and understood, because they would be given in circumstances that would give us to think, and to get, and to understand, with exactness as a horizon.

In a second time, there is a very considerable analysis to make of the matter of the musical writing in the twentieth century, to come onto a vision of the whole questions, and to venture interpretations, remarks, links, about the different natures and appearances of the parameters of the dialectic, as well as of the configuration, of the representation, and of the permanency and transformation and evolution, of the musical fact, as far as harmony is concerned.

This is partly the object of musings I've been working on, and that, besides the articles I have written here, I'm going to carry on in the texts and lectures I intend to give. For a matter of fact, two of them will happen on next January 14th and 21st, at the Maison des Conservatoires.

It seems to me, that beyond the agreed and doubtful forms of what we keep calling, as a convention, a musical modernity, the time has come for long for deeply looking into the permanent values of a musical fact that has to be understood and thought, and gathered, and experienced.

It is later that we will know to what surprises and illusions of the mind, about this intangible part of permanent mystery spirited with movement – I mean : music –, we are leaden by the musical sense : in other words, by music itself.

Being careful of the past is not giving a stop to the forms of a research calling for a future, but it conditions them, and it obliges this musical future to be what it is, and to be fulfilled through evolution : which is a necessary condition for the very notion of style, both historical and transient, to get born again.

Words recorded by Emmanuel Renaud