



A New musical ‘Language’

Music topics by PRESTO

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Last week I quoted Toscanini’s withering opinion of modern music. This week I had a chat with a modern composer whose opinion of Toscanini’s opinion is no less withering.

The composer is Mr. William Rea, 38-year-old Belfast man who has been Acting Music Supervisor at Radio Malaya since January: He arranges the music side of programmes, writes scripts for gramophone recitals, and gives auditions. Every fortnight he also gives piano recitals and at the last he played the composition which has made his name known to the world of music, the Sonata (1950) which won the Festival of Britain prize.

All this leaves Mr. Rea little time for composing. He is at present at work on a fairly long work for string orchestra and has reached the third movement, but he finds composing in Singapore hard going.

‘Doing a row’

“It will be better when my wife and I get a place of our own, but composing in a Singapore hotel is impossible. Sometimes I take down the score and have a look at it, but I have to put it away. At other times in more sympathetic surroundings I have meditated a while and found that the notes come quite freely and I can do a row without difficulty,” he told me.

A “row” for your information are the 12 notes in the chromatic scale (as opposed to the seven notes of the diatonic scale) and “doing a row” is Mr. Rea’s description of the permutations, inversions, and variations to which a modern composer subjects the 12-tone scale.

Greater variety

Mr. Rea is an uncompromising disciple of the 12-tone technique in which composers like Schoenberg and Berg have expressed their ideas — a technique most listeners find harsh, austere and unmelodic.

But to Mr. Rea it is “a new language in which you can get a far greater variety of expression”.

“And,” he adds, “because it is a new language you cannot hope to appreciate it unless you understand it. By this I don’t mean that you must be able to follow all the inversions in a row. That would be impossible even to the keenest listener.

“Twelve-tone music is emerging from the purely intellectual exercise stage to the emotional and it is wrong to suppose that modern music excludes melody. Some of it is very beautiful.”

‘Two moderns’

Mr. Rea recommends as a beautiful 12-tone composition the *Elegy for Strings* by Ernst Krenek, a modern for whom he has a great admiration. [Peter] Racine Fricker (whose second symphony has just been performed in London) is another of Mr. Rea’s heroes though he admits “he is too serious all the time and should relax a bit.”

There is little possibility of Mr. Rea trying to convert Singapore to 12-tone music because very few works in this technique have been recorded. And it is hard to visualise any local orchestra attempting to play any.

Composers that you and I might term ‘moderns’ — like Stravinsky and Bartók, are inclined to exasperate Mr. Rea. It is as though they had betrayed their faith.

“The trouble with Stravinsky,” he said, “is that each composition differs from the one before. Sometimes he seems to be moving forward; at other times he goes right back. Bartók occasionally draws on folk music.....” and Mr. Rea’s expressive gesture suggests that this is one thing NO modern composer should ever resort to.

Mr. Rea thinks almost everything that can be said in the diatonic scale has been said by the great masters and present-day composers who are trying to say the same things a little differently instead of saying something new are not being “progressive.”

“Some do this and occasionally introduce a ‘modern’ chord which has no relation to what has gone before or what is to follow. These are not true ‘moderns’ because in the modern 12-tone technique everything fits in logically. The notes are merely the tools with which the structure is made.”

Abominations

Mr Rea’s favourite pre-composer is Ravel. Of classical composers Bach stands high in his estimation. He has one or two abominations. He dislikes ‘programme’ music and most of all he dislikes Richard Strauss’s “*Till Eulenspiegel*.”

“It is possible” he admits, “that the 12-tone technique is only a passing phase. Music is always changing. But I think it has come to stay and its full possibilities have yet to be realised.”

Mr. Rea regards the attitude of his six-year-old son as a sign that 12-tone music has lasting qualities. Mr. Rea Jr. has been conditioned to the new technique almost from birth and apparently now finds the new musical language more enjoyable than the old!