

# TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

Edited by Colin Mason

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Zoltán Kodály must be reckoned one of the fortunate among composers of his generation, not only in the long span of year he was allowed, but in the extent to which circumstances allowed his genius to blossom and bear fruit, both in his own compositions and in his powerful and inspiring influence on the musical life of Hungary. (Some of the results of this are the subject of a book review by Geoffrey Winters on p.38). Until his fortieth year, Kodály had a discouraging struggle, and it may have seemed then that being born into a country with only a very minor and marginal musical tradition was one of the hindrances to his self-realisation. But now it is clear that exactly the contrary was true. His could fairly be described as a 'minor' talent, on grounds both of the size and the nature of his output, which displayed a relatively restricted range and power of invention, and a general contentment with a received musical vocabulary and idiom. But because of his particular national situation—the lack of any well-established tradition of Hungarian art-music, let alone a heritage of 'great' music—he was able to make a contribution of major distinctiveness, if not of major stature, to twentieth-century music, whereas had he been a native of Germany, France or Italy a talent of his calibre would have been in much greater danger of being dwarfed or swamped, either by the immense weight of his musical ancestry and tradition, or by bigger native talents among his contemporaries.

But if he was to this extent fortunate in the moment and place of his birth, he fully deserved his good fortune, by his strength and individuality of character, and by his inspired awareness and exploitation of the opportunities his situation offered him for the realisation of his own potentialities. It was these qualities of vision, personality and originality of mind that enabled him to create a body of work which is not only much more widely enjoyed and performed than that of, say, his compatriots Dohnányi and Weiner (who were likewise musical conservatives, born into exactly the same situation), but magnificently complements the work of his other, more powerfully and assertively original compatriot Bartók.

It is in this complementariness that the special individuality of Kodály's achievement is to be sought. It was he who gave the pure Hungarian musical language a place in European musical literature, whereas Bartók's was more an international idiom with strong national inflexions. Indeed it might even be argued that in this sense, as well as in its lack of concern with the general musical-aesthetic problems of the epoch, Kodály's contribution was the nearer to uniqueness of character. He is one of those composers whose names will be mainly remembered by one or two works, not by his total achievement. There is not much hope, for instance, for his chamber music, in an age when Tchaikovsky's is never to be heard, and even Brahms's rarely. But the *Háry János* Suite, and perhaps the 'Psalmus Hungaricus' too, are popular classics which seem likely to hold their own with, say, *Ma Vlast* and the Polovtsian Dances, and to ensure their composer not only a well-defined place in the history of music but also continuing life in the repertory.