

TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

Edited by Colin Mason

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WRITING ABOUT NEW MUSIC

Writing illuminatingly about music, especially for fairly informed listeners, is difficult enough even when you do not first have to persuade the reader, as you often do with contemporary music, that you are discussing something worth his reading about. Tovey could safely write that “when Bach’s harmonies are marvels...his deliberate purpose is to astonish and bewilder. They are... assertions that faith is mere reason unless it can put its trust in mysteries”. Try writing in the same vein about Boulez or even Schoenberg and you merely add to the puzzled listener’s doubts, and confirm the scoffers.

This difficulty is one of the reasons for the present currency of what Wilfrid Mellers in a recent article in *The Daily Telegraph* calls “a curious notion that the only kind of writing about music that is valid must be statistical”—not in fact all that widespread a notion. The three main articles in this issue of *Tempo* for instance exemplify several “non-statistical” ways of writing about 20th-century music. In one of them another composer-critic, Hugo Cole, can actually be found making a little indirect dig at Wilfrid Mellers’s own manner of writing about music, which often tends to evade the real musical issues in favour of brilliant analogies and ‘interpretations’ - immensely valuable nevertheless in that they stimulate the reader’s interest and make him want to hear the music.

Equally stimulating, and equally evasive, is the method of Edward Lockspeiser, who in his masterly book on Debussy seeks to shed light by a minute study of everything about the composer but the music itself. Reviewing his second volume in this issue, Tim Souster (also a composer) writes of the need for “some miraculous fusion of Tovey and Boulez”, and although not all readers will strongly feel any such need “to do justice to Debussy”, this is exactly what many do feel the need of to help them understand the music of to-day’s avantgarde. Yet if we look at the best rather than the worst of informed writing about avantgarde music to-day (for instance Ligeti’s ‘Metamorphoses of Musical Form’ in the latest English volume - No. 7 - of *Die Reihe*) is it not clear that the real trouble is simply that most of us do not know what the writers are talking about, rather than any inherent obscurity in their writing? Only when we have heard and ‘experienced’ enough avantgarde music to be able to evaluate it aesthetically in some measure ourselves can we hope to get attuned to writing about it, and then we shall soon want to try to relate our experience rationally to whatever technical or “statistical” information we can get. Until then we should not be too quick to deride what may seem gibberish only to us. There are probably many sincere and discriminating music lovers in the Royal Festival Hall every night to whom much of Tovey would be gibberish too.