

# TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

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When Boulez professed not to be interested in how a piece sounded, only in how it was made, he was not by any means making an unprecedented avowal, as Morton Feldman, in an article printed in the current issue of *Composer*, seems to suppose. One of Mr. Feldman's own forebears, Charles Ives, wrote: "That music must be heard, is not essential—what it *sounds* like may not be what it *is*. Perhaps the day is coming when music-believers will learn 'that silence is a solvent . . . that gives us leave to be universal' rather than personal". Busoni put forward an almost identical proposition, and Hindemith argued that Bach's art leads us, as it led Bach, to a summit of art where "the outward hull of music, sound, will then shrink to nothingness". That the propounders of this idea of music's aspiring towards silence, or at any rate towards a purely imaginary existence, should be composers themselves, is natural enough, since they know the experience, denied to most of us, of creating music from (and generally in) silence, of hearing music in imagination before doing so in the 'reality' of sound.

Speculation at this level on the relationship of sound to music must be fruitless. Science and philosophy have as little hope of arriving at a comprehensive and satisfactory definition of it as of defining the relationship of body to soul (or mind, or spirit, according to preference). On the more worldly level of Feldman versus Boulez, Schoenberg's response to a critic's remark that he did not care for 'sound' is more relevant. " 'Sound' ", he wrote, " once a dignified quality of higher music, has deteriorated in significance since skilful workmen—orchestrators—have taken it in hand with the definite and undisguised intention of using it as a screen behind which the absence of ideas will not be noticeable". Many questions are begged here, but few musicians even today will question Schoenberg's assumption that musical ideas exist independently of sound—though this view seems to be of essentially modern origin, dating only from the time when other elements of sound besides pitch and duration (timbre, attack, dynamics, etc.) began to play an increasingly prominent part in music.

The seizing on these aspects of sound to supplement and in some degree supplant pitch as the material of composition obviously offers vast scope for the exercise of musical invention in devising pleasing and stimulating relationships of them. But can relationships of these hitherto subsidiary aspects of sound ever be a vehicle for true 'ideas' in the Schoenbergian and older sense of relationships of pitches—can they for instance ever constitute a content which can be recognized even when the sound elements are distorted, as, in the words of the lamented Hermann Scherchen (whose death is reported as these lines are written), "the logical sequence of ideas in a Beethoven sonata can be understood without difficulty, even when the piano is out of tune and the acoustical inaccuracy is unpleasant to the ear"? Or is the concentration on 'sound' in this sense merely a desperate evasion of the more difficult problem of finding new but intelligible relationships of pitches? Although the artistic fruits of the former field of experiment have so far been more readily pleasing and apparently promising than those of the latter, many musicians still feel, whether with Boulez or Hindemith that musical salvation is not in 'sound'.