

spaces of Carnegie Hall. Though small of instrumentation, the piece needs to sound loud and full and penetrating. Heard that way, its rhythmic and instrumental variety holds immediate attention. Heard at a distance, its trite melodic content and static structure dominate. There is no question that this work is the product of a delicate ear and an ingenious mind. Its esthetic value has not seemed entirely convincing to the purely musical world, though laymen have usually cast their vote in its favor. My own opinion is that its author is a case not unlike that of Scriabine. That is to say that he is a skilled harmonist and orchestrator, full of theories and animated by no small afflatus, but that there is a sugar in his product which keeps it from congealing.

The two composers have an identical preoccupation with ecstasy and an identical inability to keep a piece moving along. Their religious inspiration has no energizing force; it is drug-like, pretty-pretty, hypnotic. In Messiaen's case all the paraphernalia of commercial glamour are mobilized to depict the soul in communion with God — a ladies' chorus, divided strings, piano, harp, celesta, vibraphone, Chinese cymbal, tam-tam, and of course an electronic instrument playing vibrato (in this case the ondes Martenot). The sounds of such an ensemble, however intelligently composed, cannot transport this listener much farther than the Hollywood cornfields. Placing them at the service of religion does not ennoble them; it merely reduces a pietistic conception of some grandeur to the level of the late Aimee Semple McPherson.

NOVEMBER 19, 1949

Gloomy Masterpiece

☞ THE STAR of last night's Philharmonic program was the late Alban Berg, author of the violin concerto played by Josef Szigeti. Mr. Szigeti himself, who also played a Bach concerto (the G-minor), and the other composers represented all fitted modestly into a background for this striking work. Only Dimitri Mitropoulos, who conducted, stuck out a bit. Apparently in one of his febrile moods, he kept getting between each work and its rendering, standing out against it, till closing the eyes, with all the risks of somnolence entailed, became the only escape. Even then one could not avoid an awareness that everything was being overplayed, overpushed, overdramatized, overexpressed. Everything, at least, but the Berg concerto, itself so powerful, so lucid an introspection that even a tortured and twisting conductor could not overshadow its gloom.

German expressionism at its most intense and visceral is the work's esthetic. The twelve-tone-row technique is the method beneath its coherence. Pure genius is the source of its strength. Somber of coloration, its sound is dominated ever by the soloist, the string section, and the horns. Based on a row that outlines a circle of fifths, the constant recur-

rence of this easily noticed progression brings some monotony to the texture. Expressive chiefly of basic pleasure-pain and tension-relief patterns (the reason for my calling its expression visceral), its few cerebral references (to a Viennese waltz in the first movement and to a harmonized Bach chorale in the last) stand out like broken memories in a delirium.

The piece is too continuous, of course, too consistent to represent mind-wandering. It is a work of art, not a madman's dream, though its gloom is almost too consistent to be real. Nevertheless, it would not be fair to suspect a piece clearly so inspired in musical detail of essential second-rateness. One must, I think, take it or leave it as a whole. Your reviewer has long been willing to take it, to enjoy its musical fancy, and to admire its coloristic intensities, without, however, at any time finding his emotions transported. Such an experience often accompanies the hearing of works removed from one's personal sensibilities by space and time. It does not prove a thing against a masterpiece.

Alban Berg is dead; he has joined the classic masters. One does not have to vote about his work, to love it or to hate it. It exists in perfection, for whatever use we may care to make of it. I suspect that the world will be making more and more use of this particular piece.

DECEMBER 16, 1949

1950

The First Fifty Years

☞ THE FIRST decade and a half of this century were a glorious time for music. Creative originality has rarely run so high. In the flowering of modernism that took place during that time, the prize blooms were from three gardens. France gave us Debussy and Ravel, the impressionist technique of detailed musical description. Austria produced Schönberg and his school, the expressionist esthetic, the use of atonal harmony as a psychological microscope. Russia's cultural ambitions also received international blessing through the ballet successes of Serge de Diaghilev, whose original offering was the nationalistic primitivism of Igor Stravinsky. When the first World War interrupted for four years artistic expansion: in all forms, the garden of musical modernism was already laid out.

During the two decades that followed, the structure rose. The modern techniques got disseminated rapidly, in part through the aid of mechanical media such as the gramophone and the radio. They were popularized, vulgarized, generalized, taught in the schools. Neoclassicism was the official esthetic everywhere. Originally a Romantic invention and tainted for the modernists by its associations with Mendelssohn and Brahms