twentieth-century analysis: essays in miniature

by lothar klein

ANTON WEBERN confronts this century with music of the highest idealism. Depicted as a musical anarchist since 1905, Webern surely thought of himself as a reformer whose mission it was to restore purely musical values to a waning art. At the turn of this century, Webern was seventeen years old and Vienna was the cultural capital of the world. The reigning musical dignitaries were Wagner, Bruckner, Mahler and their young crown prince, Richard Strauss. The extravagances of an opulent music, decadent and afflicted by gout, reflected the complacency of Viennese society.

Opera and the symphony were assumed to be the weightiest utterances of mankind, humanity being carefully defined as historically coinciding with the Holy Roman Empire or, more specifically, extending from the birth of Beethoven to the wisdom of Kaiser Franz Josef the First. Wagner had convinced the era that music was the highest form of philosophy and, of course, nationalism as well. (No one yet dreamed of what was to occur in 1914.) The domineering tone of late Romanticism, with its six-hour opera and cast-of-thousand symphony, were destined to be Webern's musical enemies. Trained in philosophy and musicology by Guido Adler, Webern's mind and aesthetic rebelled against the excesses of music which had to depend on programmatic content for survival. The age was convinced musical form and content were separate qualities. Form meant a traditional matrix, *i.e.,* sonata-allegro, rondo, and the like, while content could be verbally described as the poet's sorrow or the beloved's smile. Such notions were no doubt as repugnant to Webern's musicality as the idea of the *William Tell Overture* representing "the Masked Rider" is to our sense of musical logic. Eduard Hanslick, the unpopular but incisive German critic, repudiated this form and content dichotomy in his remarkable book *Of Musical Beauty*; he stated: "in the art of music there is no content opposed to form because music has no form over and above its contents." Webern intuitively appreciated this fact. His Opus I, a passacaglia for orchestra, is a severely contrapuntal work not unrelated to the passacaglia finale of Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*. As dissimilar as these musics are, Webern was a staunch member of Brahms' camp which stood in strong opposition to Wagnerian ideals. There is something quite ironic and fatalistic about Webern's birth occuring the same year as Wagner's death, for this quiet, bespectacled Viennese was to slay the Wagnerian dragon. However, the consequences of Webern's work are only now upon us.

A young man of Webern's bent could not be satisfied with an ordinary academician for a compositional mentor. Webern's meeting with Arnold Schoenberg in 1904 was as decisive a factor in the young composer's development, as it was for his fellow student Alban Berg. Schoenberg exposed both men to the solid traditions of German music. This tutelage must have been a brilliant one, for

Schoenberg the teacher was always inspired by Schoenberg the composer. Webern and Berg found in their teacher a contemporary well versed in music of the past yet possessed by a vision of the future. It is a tribute to the genius of Webern and Berg that contact with the key seminal mind of twentieth-century music did not bar them from securing their own musical paths. The plaudits of critical acclaim, however, were reserved for Schoenberg and Berg; Webern, shy and reticent, seemed to fall by the wayside. As extreme as Schoenberg and Berg may have seemed at one time, closer perspective reveals these men, in their love for the grand musical gesture, to be more akin to an obvious Romantic ideal than was Webern. Although no member of this trio achieved easy fame, the musical world spent its bitterest scorn on Webern.

Neglect and contempt did not dissuade Webern from his musical beliefs, "To live," he once declared, "is to defend a form." Yet how was a public, accustomed to judging musical worth by length and loudness, to react to music of brevity and reserve? Only in his final work, the *Cantata Number 2* composed in 1943, did the composer manage to write a work exceeding ten minutes in length. The average time span for Webern is slightly under five minutes. Preoccupied with the clarity of chamber combinations to the almost total exclusion of orchestral music, the *Six Bagatelles,* Opus 9, of 1913, for string quartet, reveal the essential Webern. Of the piece's six movements, none lasts longer than forty seconds. Webern's brevity is not, like Satie's perverse or satirical in intent. The fifth "Bagatelle" contains only thirty-eight notes yet, for Schoenberg this music contained "a whole novel in a single sigh."

Webern's basic compositional premise is one of economy, a few notes are forced to say everything. Each note of the fifth "Bagatelle" has its unique individuality (quite unlike a Romantic hail of notes) continually revealed in varying perspectives. Themes are sparse, rhythms are supple but tense and motives are pared to the bone. The often discussed pointillist aspect of Webern, where melodies are fragmented to isolated pitches, achieves a proportioning of sound and silence which suddenly becomes crucially expressive. In its economy and formative power, Webern's melodic continuum is a lyrical geometry. Music, for Webern as for Mozart, is a process of eliminating the unessential.

This article is the second in a series of "Essays in Miniature" featuring important musical compositions and developments of the twentieth century. The series will include analyses of works by Schoenberg, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Cage, and others. The author is Assistant Professor of Theory-Composition, Department of Music, The University of Texas, Austin.

Approached harmonically, this music is truly atonal. Melodies inspire themselves and harmonies are the result of polyphonic affinities. Sensing the era of harmony had expired, Webern became a supreme contrapuntalist. After the *Bagatelles* his music relies largely on complex canonic procedures adapted to highly expressive ends. Opus 17 until the final Opus 31 develop and consummate a distinctive twelve-tone idiom which has attracted many young composers today, and elicited Stravinsky's tribute: "we must hail not only this great composer but also a real hero . . . doomed to total failure in a deaf world of ignorance and indifference."

Our concert halls seldom feature Webern; they still ring with the pomp and glamour of nineteenth-century Vienna. Webern's insight and consciousness, however, are of our time in that they reject as false a bygone concept of man in harmony with himself. Our modern art is tragic in the sense of sweeping away illusions civilizations have about themselves. Such art may be bitter; nevertheless it deals with values and forms of truth. In so doing, our art, like the art of any other time, deals with the significance of Man. Anton Webern's music is a fact, and art of such sincerity is a rare occurrence in the annals of any art. Inevitably, the *haute couture* suppliers of music will always be more popular than Webern, giving the public what it wants, the skin deep caricatures of art. Music for Webern had to be faithful to inner realities; a commercial, utopian music was foreign and dishonest to him for whom art was the highest form of integrity. If Webern will never be an official composer laureate, one must remember and honor his rightful place in the consciousness of our time.