THE TEXTURE OF MODERN MUSIC

Cannot a man live free and easy
Without admiring Pergolesi,
Or through the world in comfort go
That never heard of Doctor Blow? . . .
I would not go four miles to visit
Sebastian Bach (or Batch, which is it?) . . .
Charles Lamb: "Free Thoughts on some Eminent Composers."

The reason why my brother's so severe,
Vincentio, is—my brother has no ear; . . .
His spite at music is a pretty whim.
He loves not it, because it loves not him.
Mary Lamb to Vincent Novello.

THERE are many ways of approach to music. Some men find its charm in the external fancies which it stimulates. The imagination gives it a dramatic, a literary, or a pictorial flavour, and a mind rich in such imagery will relate it to the panorama of life. Others are captured by the grandeur or by the subtlety of its form, by the internal play of themes and texture, by technical mastery of means. While a third attitude is that of pure contemplation. To suggest a meaning, or to analyse a technique, is for this latter mood the introduction of irrelevancy, distraction, incongruity; it is the setting up of arbitrary and artificial barriers between the essence of music and pure delight in it. Each of these approaches has its proper criteria, and it would be a narrow and deadening philosophy that should attempt to impair their legitimacy. Fertility and variety in experience are major qualities in art.

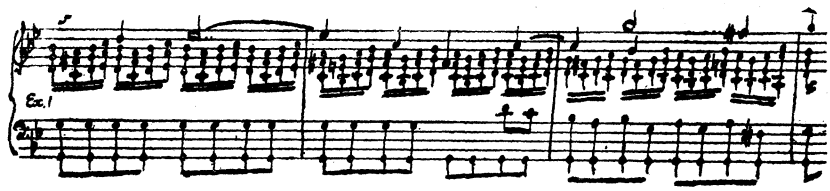
In choosing, therefore, for present purposes, a particular angle of vision, no claim is made, directly or indirectly, for an exceptional validity of judgment. Technical discussion has its modest place in the attempt to appraise an art, but it is mainly, in the last resort, the concern of the student, of a particular kind of spectator. The creative faculty transcends its technique, and inspiration may find expression in spite of almost any degree of clumsiness. The broken utterance may, indeed, be itself an earnest of conviction. It is too great a facility which is more often fatal.

Of the many formal characteristics which contemporary music exhibits, the most consistent is its devotion to qualities of texture. The music which we immediately inherit had prevailing interests of other kinds. The symphonic period busied itself chiefly with problems of architecture. It had to evolve, from the more or less versified dances of earlier times, extended instrumental forms whose consistency and cohesion had an architectural basis. The later period of drama-in-music concentrated the essence of its thought on the distillation of themes, whose function was pivotal, and whose musical adventures in the body of a work determined and justified its form. But though there are to be found, among contemporary composers, some who essay symphonic forms and who use thematic values, modernity as a whole has deserted both the practice of melodic versification, which was characteristic of even the greatest symphonic writers, and the later cult which preferred thematic drama. Contemporary music is predominantly a development of texture, and as the last great period in music when texture occupied this paramount place was that which is associated with Bach, it will provide an essential element of perspective if the two products are compared and contrasted. It is significant that modernity in this sense has synchronised with a growing appreciation of Bach.

The normal texture of Bach is contrapuntal, and its internal values have a horizontal derivation. He weaves melodic threads into a fabric whose quality is chiefly determined by the ordered beauty and individuality of its components. Harmonic values are also displayed, but these have their logical basis in the encounters of parallel strands of thought. The vertical splash of sound, so to speak, is not an end in itself. Chords seek their meaning in the behaviour of their parts. Tonality and form are equally contrapuntal in derivation, and must incorporate the general texture. Modulation, for instance, is not the mere handling of decisive chords: it is a detailed harnessing and guiding of individual parts, which may be disciplined in the process, but not destroyed.

Now a texture of this nature has its own ideals, its own limitations. It will demand, in the first place, the utmost cogency and beauty of melodic invention. It will equally insist on that economy and discipline of statement without which a brotherhood of melodies is impossible. And it will, above all, seek its climaxes in the intimacy and intensity of its thought, in the accumulated richness of its ordered complexity, rather than in the unexpectedness or vehemence of harmonic or dynamic contrasts. There are persistent rhythms in Bach, and there are arresting splashes of harmony, but they are usually complementary to his wealth of detail. They do not supplant

it. And even the simplest harmonic or rhythmic framework can be richly clothed.



Compare these ideals with the values associated with our own day. Modern texture is normally vertical, harmonic, a fabric of splashes of sound. It indulges in what it is pleased to call polyphony, but a modern score has few real parts; parts, that is, that have independent interest and validity for more than a short time. Orchestral parts now resemble horizontal sections cut through a landscape. They are like the contour lines of an ordnance map. They appear when the fabric reaches a particular degree of elevation. They disappear when the texture is thin. Their function in the technique is occasional, almost casual. Even where the musical apparatus is fairly constant, as in the string parts of an orchestra, or, indeed, in those of a quartet, there may be no real parts in the contrapuntal sense of the term. Everything is subject to vertical and harmonic exigencies, and modern players, with what our forefathers would have considered to be an amazing humility, have to be content with a place in the musical hierarchy which has just so little or just so much meaning as a composer-autocrat may determine. It is good if a part is interesting. It is no longer expected to be intelligible. Our values, in other words, are at right angles to those of Bach. We exploit masses and contrasts, and the medium is colour rather than line; the fabric is wall-paper rather than tapestry. And the effectiveness of a contemporary composer's speech may depend almost exclusively on the sensitiveness or daring of his harmonic methods.

If this be considered an indictment of contemporary music, common fairness demands that it be not addressed solely, or even chiefly, to the composers of to-day. The mischief, if mischief it is, was done a century ago, and were Bach to return and survey the music which superseded his, it is not modernity that would first engage him. He would see that already in Haydn and Mozart the " pretty tunes " had won the day. Beautiful as it may be hoped he would find them to be, he could not overlook their essentially versified character. He would fear the danger of such rigid models, the temptation to lesser

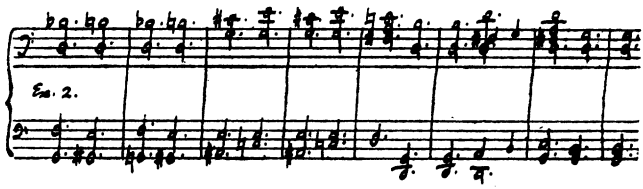
men to cultivate mere prettiness of melodic speech; and the works of the minor composers of the nineteenth century would justify his misgiving. The grandeur of Beethoven's architecture would not make him blind to the dynamic vigour which was so important a constituent in his most characteristic works, a vigour which could and did encourage sheer vehemence in many who imitated him. And the harmonic texture reflected, while it was itself rendered still more crystalline by these tendencies. Bach might point to the first chord of Beethoven's first symphony, to the first chord of the last movement of the ninth—both of them examples of effects which arrest the attention by reason of unusual or forcible statement—and turning from these to the first chord of Scriabine's " Prometheus," he would find but a difference of degree.

Bach might be a little wistful when he reached the programme-musicians, for he was not averse to an occasional excursion into the realm of literal description. But he would undoubtedly agree that while external ideas may stimulate the fancy, they can also destroy the judgment, and they can never permanently replace the values of pure music. Finally, he would reach our humble selves. What have we to show him? The pretty tunes are forsworn, the architecture is melting, the external dramas and labelled themes are out of fashion. One or two minor developments are new, at least in degree; in particular, the wealth of local colours and of semi-barbaric rhythms. Asia and Africa are imported into the concert-room, and the drum is beaten harder than ever before. And there is one major development in the attention now concentrated on the traditional music of the people, an attention which certainly enlarges the melodic horizon, though it is as yet too often incongruously distorted by the trappings of a style centuries later in sophistication. These accretions apart, there remains of our inheritance a predominantly vertical texture, an ever-increasing apparatus of sound, and a consequent leaning towards harmonies and rhythms which are new, or rich, or strange.

The story of the century between Beethoven and ourselves may, therefore, from the point of view of texture, be fairly said to hinge on the exploitation of chords as such. Their relationships control the fabric, in which " high lights " take the form of exceptional combinations. In early stages comparatively mild forms arrest the attention. These are then greatly attenuated in effect by constant use. More striking values are discovered; and so on, *ad infinitum*. Examples from Beethoven have already been given. Chopin, Schumann and, above all, Wagner, provided this form of progress with accumulating impetus. Even the initial crash of Mendelssohn's

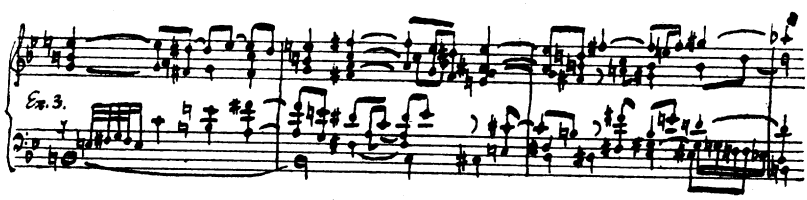
" Wedding March " embodied a popular taste already widely diffused.

It was essential to the function of such effects that they should be, in the technical sense, unprepared, and once this was granted, their use in like manner in the body of the work followed automatically. The use of chords striking in themselves or strange in their context, and the unexpected inferences or ambiguities of tonality and texture that such use involved, became normal features in the technique of expression. And the degree to which this method was already latent may be seen in Beethoven himself (" Diabelli " Variations, No. 20).



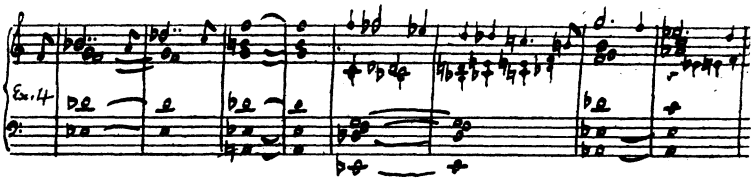
The whole variation from which the above passage is taken is exceptional in many respects, but there can be no dispute as to its " modernity," in the usual sense of that much-abused word. The vertical bias, the ambiguous tonalities, the chords, strange in themselves and still stranger in their context, are all present to an uncommon degree.

Compare with this a passage from Bach's G minor Organ Fantasia :—



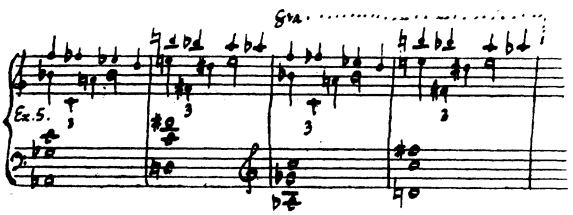
These passages should be studied in their context; but exceptional as they are, both in their relation to the general texture of their respective composers, and in the convergence of style which, in isolation, they appear superficially to show, there is yet a clear difference of derivation. Bach rarely forgets his counterpoint. Beethoven rarely remembers his.

The jump to a texture typically modern is not very formidable. The following is from Scriabine's " Poème de l'Extase." It is reduced to essential terms :—

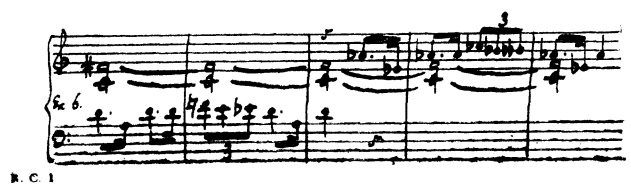


The chord in bar 3 is a comparatively novel variation and inversion of the first chord in the passage, A natural being an appoggiatura on B flat. The tonal quality of this chord is ambiguous, as all whole-tone chords are, but it is resolved regularly, if a little elliptically, through bars 5 to 8.

A few bars later occurs the following, which is interesting because it involves an ambiguity of tonality comparable in some respects to Spohr's enharmonic mannerisms :—

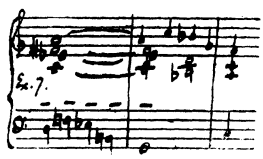


Two chords of the dominant seventh, an augmented fourth apart in pitch, have two notes in common, and it is possible to " switch " from one to the other and back again indefinitely. Rimsky-Korsakov does this most effectively in " Scheherazade " :—

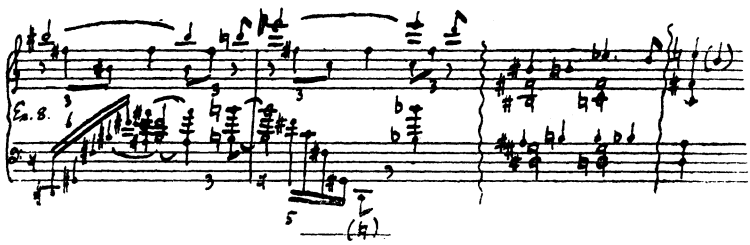


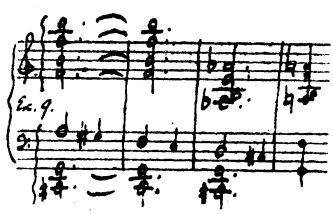
Ex. 5, above, incorporates the same device, more elaborately developed. Scriabine is very fond of it, and one could almost lay odds

that when he reaches a dominant chord of this kind he will move the root an augmented fourth, and it is then an even chance as to which tonality he will finally choose. It is the kind of device for which the chord of the diminished seventh became so notorious that our fathers could bear it no more. Richard Strauss has in our day, however, made this chord live again by using its ambiguity in a very condensed form. He moves the roots with great emphasis, and his result is at least so much stronger than Scriabine's in that Strauss has more roots to play with. See the " Symphonia Domestica " :—

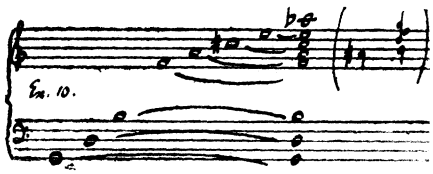


Scriabine is in fact a formalist, and his most complex chords generally have classical foundations and resolve themselves more or less regularly at last. The following is from one of his piano pieces. The original is given, then a simplification, followed by the two resolutions which he alternately adopts. A second example of similar character is given verbatim :—



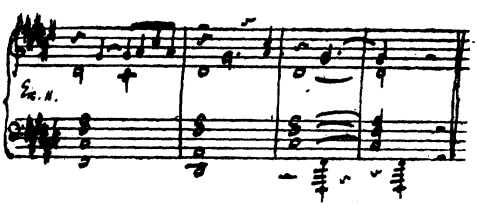


This much is obvious, that so far as chords are built up on the traditional roots—thus, for instance—



and used with whatever omissions or inversions, or with it matters not how many superadded " passing notes," as our fathers called them, or suspensions, or appoggiaturas, or what not : so far as they are thus built, and subsequently resolved, directly or indirectly, in fair consonance with inherited ideas of tonality, they are in the direct line of classical descent. Their genealogy may be greatly condensed, but their behaviour betrays their parentage.

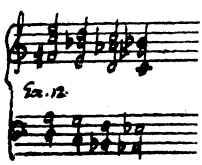
The break with tradition begins when such chords are either left " in the air," or when they move in a manner that eliminates the classic inferences; when they are unresolved, in fact. The end of the first act of *Pelléas and Mélisande* is an illuminating example in this regard :—



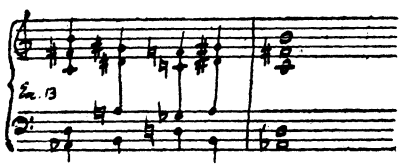
The above passage is the end of an extreme diminuendo, and the sounds die away imperceptibly. Now the musician of a past generation would have demanded, and his imagination would probably have supplied, a resolution of the last chord analogous to the resolution which Debussy actually gives in the first bar quoted. It is possible to " hear " this imaginary resolution just as in moments of strained attention we can " hear " a pianissimo note on a violin for some time after the bow has ceased to touch the string. But with increasing familiarity the ear begins to dispense with such inferences, accepting

Debussy's last chord as it stands as a point of rest, as a combination of notes already reduced to its simplest terms and having no necessary implications. And this chord may then become, as it actually has become in certain contemporary schools, invested with the finality, and incidentally with the monotony, that adheres to any conventional formula.

Another novel feature of Debussy's original style is what we may perhaps be allowed to call the harmonic " side-slip." He takes, for example, a chord of the ninth, and slides away with it whole, in any direction, until whatever tonality it originally had is, to say the least, highly attenuated. It has simply left the classical track :—

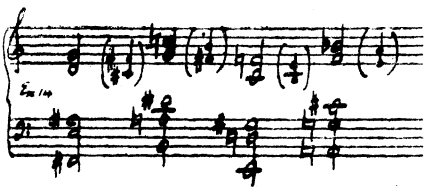


These chords also become " points of rest," not so much because their normal inferences are discounted, as because they cease, in such a context, to have any. It is then no more than a step to Goossens' :—



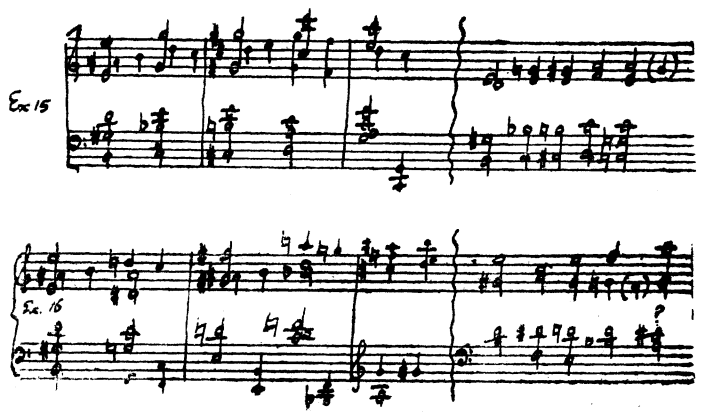
The practice and extension of these methods cannot be adequately studied apart from their whole context in the texture, and this is beyond verbal treatment. Quotation can give, at best, but a mere grammar of the subject. And grammatical inferences have a further disability which has to be constantly borne in mind. The composer himself may, and in many cases certainly will, deny that suggested elucidations of this nature have any real relation to the actual processes of his thought. He will use, for example, such progressions

as the following (omitting the notes in brackets), and will affirm that his thought is absolutely direct from chord to chord :—



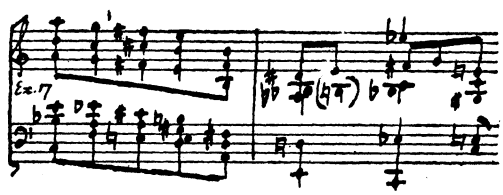
But this does not deny to his hearer the right to discover historical foundations, conscious or unconscious, in the behaviour of such chords, and to interpolate imaginatively the inferences (in brackets) which traditionally belong to them and which may help to make an unfamiliar idiom clear. The composer is in this respect like the poet who chooses intuitively a word that may be magic in its effect. A commentator may legitimately analyse this effect into the associations which enrich the word in question. Our present purpose is commentary, and we conceive our danger to lie, not in the process of analysis, but in the inference that should above all things be avoided : namely, that our laboured synthesis of detail has any conscious parallel in the inspiration of creative thought itself.

With this permanent reservation, the following passages from Delius (see MUSIC AND LETTERS, January, 1920, in which the work appeared in full), may be reduced to skeleton in order to show their bearing on the evolution of texture :—

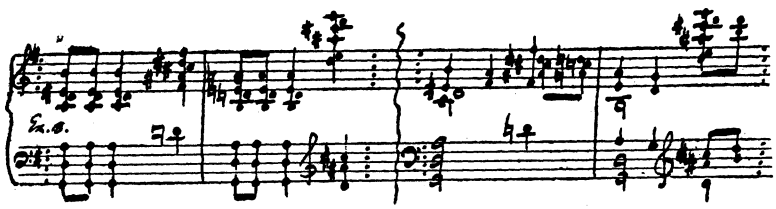


The last half-bar in Ex. 16 is a very clear case of the modern practice of eliminating what would heretofore have been inferred from the actual sounds at the beginning of this half-bar, considered alone. (See Ex. 14, above.)

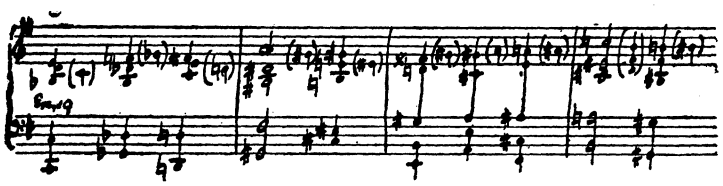
A more debatable case occurs in the following, taken from John Ireland's Prelude : " The Undertone." The first bar shows forms of " side-slip " analogous to Debussy and Delius above. But is it legitimate to suggest a genesis of the second bar's progressions by indicating an ellipsis which the interpolated note in brackets would fill?



Perhaps the closest and most homogeneous texture of this kind is to be found in Ravel, and it is both illuminating and amusing to imagine the platitudes he did not utter. Our quotation is from the " Valses nobles et sentimentales." The original is given first, and beside it a possible translation into musical journalese :—

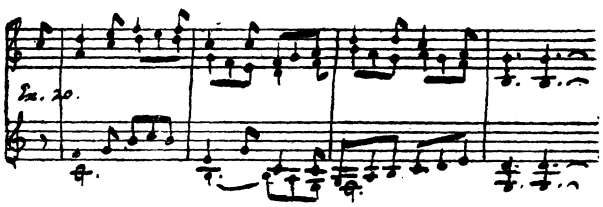


Another passage from the same work becomes a textbook exercise in suspensions and anticipations when the traditional resolutions are added, though it will be seen that many of these elements do move normally in Ravel's text itself, the disguise of their procedure lying in the simultaneous movement of other parts of the texture, which anticipates them and transforms them, when they do resolve, into further strange elements which may again resolve too late : —



" Your grasp of the obvious is painfully precise," Ravel might say; and the remark is just. But the present argument is so far fortified. A texture of this nature, however extreme in its condensation, yet has its logical foundation in classical traditions. Its novelty to our ears is due for the most part to its exclusive use of strong terms, its parallel avoidance of weak ones. Its obscurity, when it is obscure, may well be like that of classic verse, which is difficult rather through wealth of meaning than through lack of it.

A few bars from W. G. Whittaker's Part Song, " Oh, I ha'e seen the roses blaw," exhibits the quality of texture often associated with the study of folk-music :—



Its atmosphere has, to our ears, a certain relation to that of mediæval modal music, but this derivation must not be pushed too far. The neo-modal music of to-day is projected on a background of modern resources; resources, both technical and formal, which it freely incorporates. It tries to make the best of both worlds, and the mixture certainly offers great possibilities.

The growth of multiple tonality, and of pure chromaticism, or atonality, must now be dealt with.

GEORGE DYSON.

(To be continued.)