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REVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION IN ART

Béla Bartók

THE word 'revolution' is often misused in connection with contemporary music. Every composer who writes some kind of new music is called a revolutionary musician by many people. Let us now examine the exact meaning of revolution. According to dictionaries, the term denotes reversal of conditions, fundamental change. In other words, it is a destruction of all that existed before and a beginning anew, a start from nothing.

Evolution, on the other hand, almost the same word but without the letter *r*, means development by natural process from something that existed before; that is, a change by degrees. Here, the dropping of one letter is the cause of an essential difference, since the result is a word with quite the opposite meaning. This difference is much more important than it was in the famous 'iota' case concerning the words *homoiousios* and *homoousios*. The former means that the Son (of God) is similar in essence to the Father, but not quite the same. The latter means that the Son is of the same essence as the Father. This slight difference in religious opinion was the cause of much quarrelling and bloodshed in the old Byzantine Empire. Fortunately, times have changed—in the arts, at least!—so that no more blood is shed between adherents of revolution or evolution.

Let me say in advance that revolution in art (for instance, in music) in its strict sense would signify the destruction of every previously-used means and a new start from almost nothing—a set-back of several thousand years. Complete revolution in art, therefore, is impossible or, at least, is not a desirable means to an end. Applied to music, it would even mean the elimination of all known musical sounds in use today, and it would require the invention of some kind of different material as a substitute. We can hardly imagine what this new kind of material could be, for any material not consisting of musical sounds would impair the essentials of music; music must be based on musical sounds or else it would cease to be music. Such kind of revolution, carried *ad absurdum,* is sheer nonsense. We can make the statement, therefore, that even the most revolutionary movement in music has its natural limits. It must keep the original material,

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but it can, at least, destroy the system or systems which have been developed from this material for the past several thousand years and which have been in use until now. Thus, only partial revolutionary tendencies are imaginable, but even these have their very serious shortcomings—as we will see later.

There is, for instance, the quarter-tone system. Its best-known representative is the Czech composer Alois Hába. (Another is the Russian composer Vishnegradsky who lived in Paris.) Hába [. . .] had another revolutionary idea, concerning musical structure. He proclaimed that repetitions of any kind ought to be avoided in musical works, even those on a large scale. [. . .] The trend of Hába's ideas is toward overcomplication. Other revolutionaries, on the contrary, try to simplify matters: they eliminate this, they eliminate that, and finally arrive at a state of oversimplification—with rather poor results.

I know a musician who is an excellent pianist. His name is I. Weisshaus and he is a former piano pupil of mine. He was a pioneer of the most daring contemporary music and, among others, gave some concerts in the United States made up exclusively of contemporary piano music. But his ideas about composition were rather queer. For instance, he wrote a song for solo voice, without any accompaniment, of course, in which vowels replace words as the text. Moreover, this song is based on a single tone continuously repeated in various values, with alternating crescendos, diminuendos, fortes, and pianos. You will probably agree that a material reduced in such a way to almost nothing represents a rather scanty approach in the creation of a musical work of value. But this trend has its counterpart in the fine arts, especially in painting, as will be brought out later in this conference. [. . .]

A third concept, of composers other than Weisshaus, is to eliminate sounds of determined pitch from music. Or, in other words, to write pieces for percussion instruments alone. This idea seems to have been propagated mostly in this country the U.S.A.; in fact, I have seen whole programmes made up only of percussion music. However interesting the use of rhythmic and other devices, I think it is nevertheless a rather monotonous experience for the listener to sit through a programme made up exclusively of percussion music. This is my feeling despite my high personal interest in the exploitation of percussion instruments in various new ways. [. . .]

Similar tendencies have appeared in literature, especially in poetry, where rhythm and the contrast or similarity of word sounds (or, I would say, the musical harmonies produced by words) are sometimes more important factors than word sense. A further development has been the use of words which have meaning in themselves as individual units, but are at the same time senseless from the contextual viewpoint. These experiments finally lead to the complete elimination of words and the exclusive use of single vowels and occasional consonants. I have seen a printed volume, about fifteen years ago in the Bauhaus colony of Dessau, Germany, made up entirely of such kind of 'poems'! As a matter of fact, the use of vowels solely for the sake of their sound may be considered as a trespass of literary boundaries; in fact, it is an intrusion into music's domain!

In modern painting we can observe similar tendencies. First came the elimination of objects and the exclusive use of various lines, curves, and geometrical forms without any allusion to external shapes existing in nature. These lines, curves, and so forth were used according to certain plans, purposed to give an equilibrium and a harmonious unity to the picture. Kandinsky was the first painter who tried this style and achieved considerable results. His non-objective

paintings are still comparatively complicated. After Kandinsky came others who attempted to simplify the means. One of these painters is Dutch-born [Piet] Mondrian. [. . .] I am only a musician, and I am not competent to judge paintings. But Mondrian's kind of reduction of means seems to be a rather poor device for satisfactory artistic communication.

Here we have a remarkable phenomenon: the simultaneous appearance of similar revolutionary tendencies in all three branches of the arts—painting, literature, and music. In painting, this tendency had some success; in fact, Mondrian's pictures and those of similar trend by other painters were bought by people quite regularly. In literature there was less success, and in music no success at all.

If we turn our attention toward Schoenberg and Stravinsky, the two leading composers of the past decades, we will see that their works are decidedly the outcome of evolution. In the succession of their compositions there is no abrupt turning away from previous devices and no abolition of almost all the means used by preceding composers. What we will see is a gradual change, leading from the patterns and means of their predecessors, to a style and means of expression of their own.

Let us first look at Schoenberg's works. Anybody who ever heard the very early compositions of Schoenberg, especially his string sextet *Verklärte Nacht,* or his great choral-orchestral work *Gurrelieder,* would recognize that they are a continuation, a further development, or—if I am allowed to use the word—an exaggeration of the Wagner style. As further steps come the two string quartets; the first in one movement lasting about fifty minutes, reminding us somehow of Liszt's Piano Sonata (only in its lengthy structure, of course, not in its style). Stylistically the quartet is a further development of Wagner's music, very polyphonic, very chromatic, perhaps mingled with Mahler and [R.] Strauss elements. The Second String Quartet has in its last two movements a vocal part added to the strings. According to Schoenberg's own confession, the Second Quartet is the last of his tonal works. As a very consistent further development, the next step leads to the Three Piano Pieces op 11—the first Schoenberg work which is said to completely renounce tonality.[1]

In these piano pieces, as well as in the following nine or ten Schoenberg works, no pre-established system appears. Later, he constructed a system containing certain rules which he calls the twelve-note system, and to which he rigorously adhered in all his later works. It would go too far to give a detailed description of his latest works. It can be said, however, that no essential stylistic changes can be discovered in them. They may be still more complicated because of the use of the system, but their style of expression is, in its main features, the same with which he began in op.11.

Between Schoenberg and Stravinsky is the greatest imaginable contrast. No wonder! Stravinsky started from a totally different point or, better, from totally different points (he shows several starts during his career). Everybody knows of his dislike of Wagner. Instead of Wagner, therefore, he turned to contemporary French music and especially to the music of his Russian predecessors as starting points. He admired the transparency of the Mozart style, but it seems that in his youth he did not study Beethoven's music very well and this, at least, appears in the first volume of his autobiography. In fact, Stravinsky writes that when he planned to write his Piano Sonata [1925]—he was already over forty

[1] There is an indication in Bartók's notes for a demonstration here.

years old—he thought it would be useful to do some preliminary study in this field. So he turned to the Beethoven piano sonatas and, as he says, discovered that they are very good and interesting music (or words to that effect). This statement means that he did not know the Beethoven sonatas prior to the early 1920's. His very early works—for instance, the Four Etudes for piano—are not very well-known. But his *Fireworks,* a dazzling orchestral work, shows the above-mentioned elements as a basis for a start, although it already has some features of his own. Then follows the *Firebird* ballet, a more accomplished work. With *Petrushka* a new element enters as a basis: Russian peasant music. This element is retained in a still more perfected style in the following *Le Sacre du Printemps,* more or less, perhaps, in *Rossignol* also, and, finally, as the highest accomplishment, in his 'Village Wedding Scenes' (*Les Noces*).[1]

Now, almost all the motives (for instance, of *Sacre*) seem to be Russian peasant music motives or their excellent imitations. And the harmonies into which they are inserted are marvellously suitable for the creation of a kind of apotheosis of the Russian rural music. But, despite the quite incredible novelty displayed throughout, the aforementioned bases as original starting points remain recognizable. Even the origin of the rough-grained, brittle, and jerky musical structure, backed by ostinatos, which is so completely different from any structural proceeding of the past, may be sought in the short-breathed Russian peasant motives. For these, as we have seen, consist of four, two, or even one bar.

After the 'Village Wedding Scenes,' a short jazz period followed with a few works.[2] Then comes again a different period, now and then broken by some digressions, which lasts until the present day. This is Stravinsky's neoclassical period of which the *Pulcinella* music is only a preparatory study. It really starts with his Octet for wind instruments, followed by his Concerto for Piano (wind instruments and percussion), piano solo pieces, and many other works too numerous to mention here. Just at the beginning of this period, when I once met Stravinsky in Paris, he told me that he thinks he has the right to incorporate into his music any material he believes to be fit or appropriate for his purposes. This belief reminds us of Molière's saying: *Je prends mon bien ou je le trouve.* With this conviction, Stravinsky turned to the music of bygone times, to the so-called classical music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for a new starting point. This start again shows pure evolutionary principles and is by no means revolutionary in concept.

The opinion of some people that Stravinsky's neoclassical style is based on Bach, Handel, and other composers of their time is a rather superficial one. As a matter of fact, he turns only to the material of that period, to the patterns used by Bach, Handel, and others. Stravinsky uses this material in his own way, arranging and transforming it according to his own individual spirit, thus creating works of a new, individual style. Had he tried also to transpose Bach's or Handel's spirit into his work, imitation and not creation would have been the result.

As we have seen from the foregoing discussion, those composers who achieved the most in the last decades were not demolishing revolutionaries; indeed, the development of their art has been, on the contrary, based on a steady and continuous evolution.

[1] A pencilled note between paragraphs reads 'Do they know (*Les Noces*) it?'.

[2] A note here indicates that the works are to be listed.