Tempo

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

Edited by Colin Mason

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 51-36700

The survey of Hungarian composition today which forms the greater part of this issue of *Tempo* shows an abundance of activity that musicians and listeners in England and the west generally are little acquainted with. A similar picture, of two dozen or more able and busy composers producing work scarcely known beyond their own frontiers, would of course be presented by a survey of many other of the smaller countries in Europe—say Sweden (featured in this year's Camden Festival), Holland or Czechoslovakia. The handful of outstanding creative talents in any epoch will always fulfil themselves, whatever the problems of their national or historical situation, and usually in a totally unpredictable way —as we see in the examples of Messiaen and Shostakovich, the one battling against severe constraints on his freedom to take account of contemporary developments elsewhere, and therefore writing music which, as Malcolm Williamson recently said of the other, "denied that Bartók, Webern and Stravinsky had ever existed". For those whose gifts fall short of this kind of genius, the achievement of a place in the international repertoire, or any kind of international hearing, is much more a matter of chance, of one sort or another; and even some exceptional musical talents can be appreciably affected, in the extent to which they are able to fulfil themselves, by such matters of extra-musical chance as time and place of birth. This is true for instance of both the great Hungarian predecessors of the composers discussed in the following pages. Kodály in particular, whose creative gifts and originality in purely musical terms were comparatively minor, was enabled by the national and historical situation he was born into, and by a visionary opportunism amounting to genius in seeing what was to be done in it, to create something of undisputedly major originality and stature in twentieth-century music. Nor can the fact that he and Bartók emerged together be regarded as sheer coincidence; although Bartók's creative musical genius was considerably more powerful than Kodály's, he was not, in international terms, one of the greatest innovators of his age, and he might not have succeeded in creating quite such a remarkable and important musical achievement as he did, had he not had the virgin soil of a Hungarian national style to cultivate—had he been born or brought up, say, an Austrian or a Czech (as might easily have happened).

Following so soon upon these two masters, the present generation in Hungary have faced a more formidable task than their contemporaries elsewhere, both in trying to gain the attention of audiences abroad, who perhaps feel that Bartók and Kodály claim all the attention they can devote to Hungary, and in trying to find a new path to strike out on so soon after their elders had done just that. Nor was their problem lightened by the particularly doctrinaire

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200045927 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'official' attitude to music that prevailed in Hungary in the early 1950s, which led Kadosa to write the works that he ruefully refers to in the quotation on p.37, and led another distinguished composer, András Mihály (see p.32), who now conducts Budapest's newly founded avant-garde ensemble, to argue that Bartók's middle-period works were experimental aberrations that should be suppressed. Thus while Polish composers were abreast of the leaders of European post-serial musical development, the Hungarians, as almost every biography in the following pages shows, were only just tasting the hitherto forbidden fruits of serialism itself. The lost ground has now largely been made up, and it is interesting to find Stephen Walsh (p.42) suggesting, in connection with the work of Rudolf Maros, that the delay may not have been entirely to the Hungarian's disadvantage. Certainly, as the series of articles that follows seeks to show, they are now making a genuine contribution to contemporary European music—a contribution combining a concern with the real problems of post-serial composition with a continuing interest in preserving their new-found 'national' voice in music, and showing, in a wide range of activity and styles, several interesting and distinctive personalities well worth seeking better acquaintance with.

HUNGARIAN COMPOSERS TODAY

Endre Szervánszky *by Ferenc Halmy*

Endre Szervánszky (b.1911) is one of the outstanding figures on the Hungarian musical scene since Bartók and Kodály. He had his first notable success with his first string quartet. When this was performed by the Végh Quartet in Budapest in 1943, the distinguished music critic Dénes Bartha wrote: "The quartet must be considered by far the best, most original, forceful and mature creation of contemporary Hungarian chamber music". Completed five years earlier, in 1938, it was Szervánszky's first work of significance, and although he modestly described it in the printed programme as an "essay on Bartók", it already gives clear evidence of his creative individuality. For various reasons however, including of course the war, he did not go on to any comparable achievement until after 1945, although he did write a number of minor works for piano (Sonatina, Little Suite), as well as a Sonata for violin and piano (1945), of somewhat atonal character.

In the years following the war he did not pursue either of these directions. He has not written for piano solo since that time, and all his compositions of the period 1945–54 show a markedly Hungarian style based on folk music. One of the most successful of these was the Serenade for string orchestra (1947), which displays much tonal, modal and rhythmic variety and ingenuity. It won immediate popularity, was printed in a number of editions, and is still often performed, especially by school orchestras.

After the difficult period from 1947-50, when, in common with other composers, he was obliged to satisfy official demands of the time with works

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