

PROPHETS without HONOUR

*Modern Composers
Who Will Stand
Side by Side With
the Old Masters*

Special to the Record

by

"SCHERZO"

NOT long ago in the "Music of the Week" page, I mentioned in a critical paragraph that there were composers living to-day who would, in all probability, be remembered by posterity with such masters as Beethoven and Bach. It was only to be expected that my statement touched a delicate spot in the minds of lovers of the old masters.

In writing this article I must trespass for a short time on the ground of musical technicalities, and I pray that not-so-technical readers will have patience with me. I do not intend bringing into the discussion many names of individual composers, as it is more on the grounds of comparative periods in the lives of prominent musicians that I make my claim for the equality of the moderns.

Evolution of Music

IN its early stages music was nothing less than the formation of a language, and even a few centuries ago the beauty of the language far surpassed the beauty of music. As one critic states: "Isaiah to-day is of the highest and noblest, but music of 3000 years ago would mean nothing to our ears."

As the years rolled by music grew from its simple unison form to four- (and more) part harmony. Then the coming of Bach revolutionised the art by proving that equal temperament was an essential as far as the progress of music was concerned.

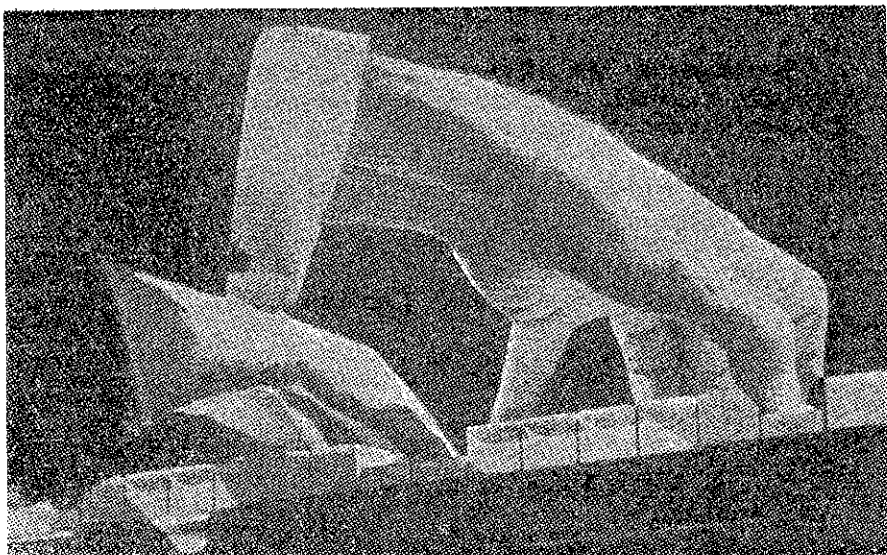
The Bachs and Handel raised the standard of music to a stage never before attained, and, with the coming of Beethoven, the apparent ideal had been reached. Hasty opinions of Bach were as hastily abandoned. Opinions varied even regarding Beethoven.

THE age of these earlier composers was not as complex as the present age, although people were just as quick to condemn the earlier composers in their time as some of us are quick to decry the works of the present generation of musicians.

The more knowledge acquired by man concerning any art, the more ability is required to apply the additional knowledge to his work—and a greater ability still is necessary for the spectator to conceive and appreciate the new form. So it is with music, and to more fully explain my case I claim privilege by bringing in Debussy as a "modern."

Harmonic Complexity

IN the time of Bach, Beethoven, and Schubert there was in vogue a simpler form of harmonic construction. The use of overtones as constituted of chords was almost negligible. Science has taught us that most musical sounds are complex sounds, that they are made up of certain other sounds which add to the quality of the fundamental.



HANDS ON THE KEYBOARD

Have a harder technical task to-day than ever before. . . .

AS an example let us take a note C₁. This note is actually constructed by a series of other notes (overtones), which all add to making the characteristic quality of the note C₁. These notes are as follows: C₁ (fundamental), C (first overtone), G (second overtone), C' (third overtone), E' (fourth overtone), G' (fifth overtone), and so on—each overtone carrying with it different degrees of loudness. This theory can easily be tested on the piano by holding down a note and sharply striking another note an octave below the note held. The held note will then be heard to sound.

New School Established

THIS characteristic was not employed in the music of the past, but with the coming of Debussy a new harmony school became established. Composers began to realise that they could break away from the old school of the simple harmonic form and exploit a new field—a field of greater harmonic colouring.

New chords were introduced and what had been understood in the past as dissonance became consonance to the modern ear.

As a well-known case in point the Scriabin chord of fourths is made up entirely of overtones, and with an almost inexhaustible supply of overtones available, new sounds became apparent to the composers and new sounds requiring greater ingenuity on the part of the writer to express. And these complex chords have now become a regular feature of present-day composition.

These new sounds give more colour to music.

With the advent of new colouring, new forms have arisen. With such a complexity, is it not reasonable to expect that the present-day composer must need greater ability than those of the past in expressing the new form?

Amazingly High Standard

THE set forms of the earlier composers became, after a while, a mathematical equation—to-day the contrapuntal art has attained an amazingly high standard, and this fact, combined with the new harmonies, has raised the standard of musical composition to a far higher place than it has ever been before.

To-day we find the art containing more inherent vitality than ever before, and as the history of music has been a history of technical conquest there must be at least some progression in the art.

There will be, no doubt, a truer perspective later on than now, and when I think of how the critics and general public condemned Schubert, Verdi, Wagner, Rossini, Liszt (to name a few) in their time, why should we not be more considerate to our present-day writers?

To name a few prominent composers of the day—and even some of these have not always (Continued on p. 24.)