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books

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG: LETTERS, selected and edited by Erwin Stein,
translated from the original German by Ethna Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser

FABER AND FABER, paperback edition, 1974 (£2.95)

This is a very welcome paperback edition, presumably issued for Schoenberg's centenary year, of a book that has been available for ten years; the original German edition was published in 1958. It has therefore been well worked over in the traditional way by reviewers, Donald Mitchell's supervising eye (which would seem to have been responsible for some significant improvements in the English edition - in particular, the inclusion of four letters to Mahler) has presumably been duly noted and the book has been a valuable source for a wide variety of people ranging from eminent musicologists down to undergraduates writing B.Mus. dissertations (myself included in the latter category); all this despite the fact that the amount of detailed comment on actual music is not great - and why should we expect it to be when the composer spent so much valuable time which might have been used for composition on the writing of theoretical books and articles?

In short, then, another ordinary review would be almost superfluous. So I should like to use this one to draw attention to something to which I have already alluded earlier in this issue - namely, Schoenberg's attitude to writing about music and who is the better equipped to do it, the composer or the critic. This debate has not diminished in importance since composers first felt the need to discuss music in public - either their own or that of others. In our own time, Stockhausen has expressed the idea, by no means new, that composers always make the best critics; should we take this to mean that he thinks that all non-composing music critics should be pensioned off (or worse) and that only composers should be allowed to criticise their fellows (foes or only friends?) in the national press and on radio and television?

Schoenberg was a patient righter of wrongs and wrong-doers. I don't imagine that he was an inveterate writer to the press, correcting all the factual errors and what he considered to be the misinformed opinions in everything he read over the breakfast table, but there are a number of instances in these letters of just this sort of thing. In November 1958 he wrote to Olin Downes, music critic of the New York Times, pointing out that his Variations for Orchestra had been erroneously described by Mr. Downes as

'Variations upon the theme B-A-C-H' and justifying his use of the B-A-C-H motive in the piece (see Letter 179). And ten years later we find him writing a further letter to Downes defending Mahler from that critic's diatribes against the composer in a review of a performance of the Seventh Symphony by Mitropolous (Letter 230), plus a reply (Letter 231) to Downes' letter to him - this last being unpublished in this edition: surely one of several annoying places where relevant linking material, if only in summary form, could have been profitably and not too clutteringly included?

What Downes had in fact done was to publish Schoenberg's first letter - without his permission - together with his reply to it in the New York Times. The critic's letter must have been interesting, since it provoked some very interesting responses from Schoenberg. Among which we find the following:

"Now finally to your question whether I believe composers are as a rule fair or unbiased critics of other composers; I think they are in the first instance fighters for their own musical ideas. The ideas of other composers are their enemies. You can not restrict a fighter. His blows are correct when they hit hard, and only then is he fair. Thus I do not resent what Schumann said about Wagner, or Hugo Wolf about Brahms. But I resent what Hanslick said against Wagner and Bruckner. Wagner, Wolf, Mahler and Strauss fought for life or death of their ideas. "But you fight only for principles, or rather for the application of principles."

I think it is clear from this that Schoenberg would not have agreed wholeheartedly with Stockhausen about composers being always the best critics. Far from being a composer's best friend, his fellow composer acting in a critical capacity would only be right when he considered the other wrong. Whether this would invariably be so, or whether it could not more often be a case of the composer/critic's own music acting as a barrier to any truly helpful and just estimation of that of another may be debated. I can give what I consider to be examples of both cases from my own personal experience. And the absence of disagreement among composers can lead to a far less healthy situation - the coterie and clique. Whatever we may decide, the view on this subject of one of the most important music theorists of all time, if not one of the greatest composers, should be taken into consideration.

Let us hope, finally, for the eventual removal of all those tantalising bracketed dots in these letters. Though most of them may only indicate the prudent omission of boring detail best consigned to oblivion, their presence is a continuing reminder to the researcher concerned with the music and ideas of the Second Viennese School that there are still many personal barriers between him and certain aspects of the truth. Surely they can ultimately do nothing but harm to the music of the composers they aim to protect?

KEITH POTTER