

Tempo

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SCHOENBERG TODAY

In the opening sentence of a new column which is to be a regular one in *Tempo*, Hans Keller (p.30) apologizes for his chosen title 'The Contemporary Problem'. One aspect of this problem is how far back does the present, or the time that is with us, stretch; and some of our readers who want to see the fetters of the past completely cast off 'such as Morton Feldman, who in a criticism of a *Tempo* editorial some time ago said: "I have no real quarrel with that man on *Tempo*. I agree with everything he says about music . . . with only one difference. I don't like it. I want to change it.") might complain not that the title of the new column is 'tedious', as the author fears, but that under it he is still talking about Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Most listeners today would deny that Stravinsky, is a problem any longer; and as far as he is one, the dispute is not about the nature but about the quality of his achievement, and is a matter of taste rather than of basic principle. Is this also true of Schoenberg? He is undoubtedly a problem, but hardly a contemporary one. And in treating him still as one, are we not evading the real Schoenberg problem, which may be not so much that of recognizing his genius as that of having the realism to recognize, in spite of his uncontested importance in the development of twentieth-century music, his comparative failure (compared, that is, to Stravinsky or his other great contemporary, Bartók) to solve the strictly limited problem of his own salvation as a composer?

What deceives Mr. Keller and many of the rest of us into treating Schoenberg still as a 'contemporary' issue is that the problem that he could not solve is certainly still with us, the full recognition of it having indeed been delayed for forty years not least by the impressive determination and influence of his attempt to solve half of it—the wrong half, as we have now come to see. The changes of tonal organization that became necessary for composition to continue after the first decade of his century implied, as Webern almost alone knew until his posthumous school began to proclaim it, a change in what music was, whereas Schoenberg, having devised a new means for composition, felt this was going far enough, and applied it essentially to trying to ensure the continuance of what music had until then been. Accepting the necessity for the change that Schoenberg resisted is still the essence of 'the contemporary problem', for composers as for listeners, and it is still difficult (witness Feldman)—though perhaps less difficult than accepting Schoenberg. There does seem hope of a successful solution (or variety of solutions) of the contemporary problem, but persevering with Schoenberg is something that many of us are beginning to feel we might now justifiably give up.