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PART THREE

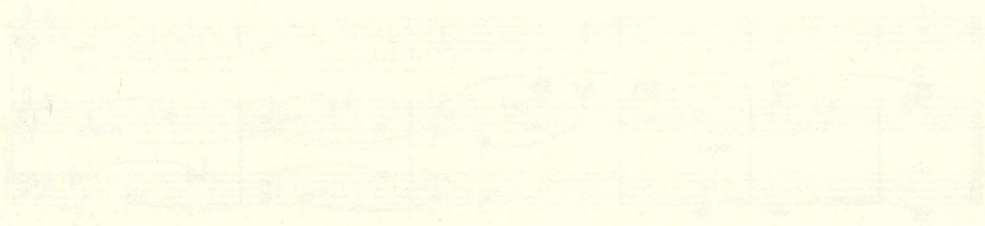
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CONCLUSION

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But he can write music all right.

This feature is all the more (Joyce, in the letter quoted on p. 1) for clarity, as the master of rich late-romantic chord complexes, shows himself more uncertainly than ever before.



R.C. What is technique?

I.S. The whole man. We learn how to use it but we cannot acquire it in the first place; or, perhaps I should say that we are born with the ability to acquire it. . . . A single blot on a paper by my friend Eugene Berman I instantly recognise as a Berman blot. What have I recognised - a style or a technique? Are they the same signature of the whole man? Stendhal (in the Roman Promenades) believed that style is 'the manner that each one has of saying the same thing'. But, obviously, no one says the same thing because the saying is also the thing. A technique or a style for saying something original does not exist a priori, it is created by the original saying itself. . . . We cannot say 'the technique of Bach' (I never say it), yet in every sense he had more of it than anyone; our extraneous meaning becomes ridiculous when we try to imagine the separation of Bach's musical substance and the making of it. Technique is not a teachable science, neither is it learning, nor scholarship, nor even the knowledge of how to do something. It is creation, and, being creation, it is new every time. . . . At present all of the arts, but especially music, are engaged in 'examinations of technique'. In my sense such an examination must be into the nature of art itself - an examination that is both perpetual and new every time - or it is nothing. (1)

Stravinsky sets high standards, and it is unlikely that he would have approved of the treatment given to Schoeck in this book. Throughout the work a distinction between style and technique has been implied, and yet the words have never been properly defined. The problem is epitomised in our chapter on the Hesse-Lieder, with its imperceptible transition from discussion of style to discussion of technique. Surely this indicates some basic confusion in the method of treatment?

Only if it is supposed that style and technique are readily definable things. In fact no real distinction between them is possible: even Stravinsky, with his marvellous command of language, seems to be struggling to say what he means. Rather, they are fluid concepts which must be defined and redefined every time they are used. Since they have no definitive meaning, therefore, it seems legitimate to lend them one, just for the purposes of discussion - to insist on a temporary separation of the concepts, albeit a factitious one, in order that certain points can be made.

1) Stravinsky and Craft, Conversations with Igor Stravinsky, pp. 26-7.



In the end, these concepts are bound to come together again, in our discussion as in our listening. But this 'coming together' at the end, in our discussion at least, cannot be merely a passive act. In order to justify the kind of separation described, we have to integrate our technical discussion with what we know of Schoeck's life and opinions. What then is the 'whole man'?

A convenient starting-point might be the general form of the works we have been discussing, Schoeck's treatment of the cycle as a genre. In the second chapter of Part I we saw how he went to certain models for ideas, ideas which were illustrated both then and in Part II. Schoeck's dependence on these models - dependence is not too strong a word - tells us something about his relationship to the lieder tradition; his willingness to accept, almost as a point of dogma, whatever ideas could be useful to him, provided they derived from that tradition. At the same time, the absence from his work of certain other ideas - ideas he might have learnt from French composers, for example - also tells us something. In both cases we have the evidence of his spoken remarks, and of the comments of his friends, as support.

What such comparisons cannot tell us is the extent of Schoeck's own contribution to the genre. For this we have to return to the works. In terms of purely artistic contribution - Schoeck's addition to the 'world's wealth' - it is of course his best works that we must value most, and these have singled themselves out in the course of the discussion. In terms of formal ideas, the most original do not always occur in the best works: take Wanderung im Gebirge, with its individual use of a motto-theme, or Spielmannsweisen, with its superimposition of ternary structures. In general, Schoeck is most impressive not when he is inventing new ideas, but when he is inventing new uses for traditional ones - which is to say, finding new expressive meanings for them. We can trace a direct line, so far as formal practice is concerned, from An die ferne Geliebte through Gaselen to Lebendig begraben, and no one would guess that the continuity established by Beethoven's simple musical links would one day be given such superb expressive force as it is in the last work. Then there is the instrumental element in Wandersprüche, again derived from Beethoven but here



made into something quite new. And the extension of the same element in the Notturmo, where the songs are interspersed with fully-elaborated movements for string quartet - all these ideas are surely just as 'original' as if Schoeck were reconstructing the entire framework.

If his treatment of the song cycle is essentially traditional, his technical innovations are idiosyncratic. To be sure, they can usually be related to romantic practice: thus, the Schoeckian *ostinato* stems from Wolf, the individual use of thematic transformation from Strauss, the employment of harmonic areas from almost any composer in the tradition. But in almost every case, as we have seen, there is an element all of Schoeck's own which, if carried through to its logical conclusion, would tend to subvert not only romantic tradition but the whole Western harmonic system. The obvious example is Schoeck's use of the chordal series, with its profound implications for the grammatical sense of each chord. To say that Schoeck's techniques, if developed further, would have had such extreme effects is not to claim a commensurate importance for him; it merely indicates that his music is more thoughtful, and potentially more radical, than is sometimes stated.

It is, in fact, in the discrepancy between Schoeck's handling of the cycle as a genre and his technical usages that the contradiction in his nature is most apparent. In the former he is a committed traditionalist; in the latter, a no less committed, albeit unconscious, radical. This contradiction, seen most clearly in the Elegie, goes right through his output, reflected technically, stylistically and in his choice of themes. In the biographical chapter we saw how his style develops by contrasts; in the technical domain, similarly, there is hardly an idea that occurs to him which is not developed extensively, dropped (sometimes for many years), and then developed again. As for his choice of themes, we have seen how some of his subjects, such as the image of the brook chasing the rose in the Notturmo, positively demand complex treatment, while others, such as the theme of Spielmannsweisen, require simplicity. Whether the theme dictated the style or vice versa is an unanswerable question: clearly the two arose inseparably.

What was the reason for this contradiction, these constant



shifts of aesthetic aim? In the biographical chapter a picture was painted of Schoeck, the 'radical conservative', venturing beyond self-prescribed artistic limits and then drawing back, only to start all over again. That still seems a reasonable picture, but it lacks conviction. What it fails to include is some indication of a basic lack of self-confidence in the composer, caused perhaps by the reversal of his fortunes after the First World War, which led him to vacillate in such a manner. In a review of Vogel's thematic catalogue, Hans Gál commends the 'quiet determination with which [Schoeck] found his way and persisted on it, independent of the conflicting currents of his time. . . .'<sup>1</sup> On a purely technical level, at least, that statement would need some correction.

Yet there is a fundamental consistency about Schoeck's achievement which compels respect, even if one cannot bring oneself to share all his opinions. From first to last his music is concerned with the same basic themes; now and then the emphasis shifts, or the pessimism deepens, but on the whole the author of the Drei Schilflieder and the author of Nachhall are the same man. What distinguishes them is fifty years of continuous composing and contemplation, years which extracted every fine shade of nostalgia and romantic melancholy. The following lines catch the spirit -

Ich wollt', ich läg' begraben,  
und über mir rauschte weit  
die Linde jeden Abend  
von der alten, schönen Zeit

- lines not from Lebendig begraben but from the Elegie (see above, p. 131). The nostalgia, the devotion to nature, the longing for death - all are typical emotions, and typical too is the sensibility - that of early German romanticism - in which they are expressed.

This matter of sensibility is important because it serves to distinguish Schoeck from almost every other composer of his time. Gál is right in asserting Schoeck's independence of modern trends. Even when he uses 'modern' techniques, he has generally arrived at them by his own route; and the truly radical things in his music

1) 'Werner Vogel: "Thematisches Verzeichnis der Werke von Othmar Schoeck"' [review], Erasmus, 25 September 1960, col. 545.



are not found in any other modern composer. Similarly, I can think of no other twentieth-century composer who has been so fully absorbed in the poems, and the themes, and the spirit, of early romanticism. This disparity, caused by Schoeck's wholehearted rejection of modern life, has in turn caused it to reject him. The image of the man buried alive, which Schoeck thought to represent his expulsion, or withdrawal, from contemporary affairs, turns out to have a still deeper meaning: his spiritual and psychological 'burial' in the nineteenth century.

What, then, is his relation to other music? How does he fit into the pattern of his age? In the lieder tradition, at least, his role is straightforward. Deeply rooted in the conventions of Schubert, Schumann and Wolf, he upholds those conventions, uniting them with a twentieth-century language and technique. Though obviously not so substantial a figure as any one of them, he deserves consideration because he extends the possibilities of the lied - opening it out into long narrative arioso settings on one hand, unifying it by his variation techniques on the other. In some ways, his work represents a synthesis of the tendencies represented by Reger and Wolf, combining something of the former's genius in the instrumental field with something of the latter's genius for musical characterisation. From this point of view the Notturmo would be considered his central work.

As a Swiss composer his role is more ambiguous. If this book has tended to neglect the 'Swiss' side of his music - comparisons with Honegger, Willy Burkhard et al. - it is because, to the outsider at least, he appears to have little in common with them. Whereas they in their separate ways have followed twentieth-century traditions - Honegger first a member of Les Six, then an 'establishment' composer of symphonies and oratorios, Burkhard a follower of Hindemith - Schoeck remains obstinately the outsider, proudly pursuing what he sees as the great tradition - the 'mighty river' of Befreite Sehnsucht - while apparently becoming more and more of an eccentric, increasingly 'irrelevant' to the concerns of our time.

Yet there is a sense - a very profound sense - in which Schoeck was right. If his music has little to do with contemporary Swiss work, its roots in the Austro-German tradition are rock-solid. By



his choice of themes, by temperament, by technical usage, and above all by his continuing use of tonality, Schoeck establishes himself as a successor to Schubert, Schumann and the rest as surely as if he had been born a German. Where the language branches off, around 1912, with its various experiments in atonality, whole-tone writing and so on, Schoeck keeps it going, enriching its technical and expressive possibilities but, even more importantly, preserving its existing ones. As a 'conservative revolutionary' he is one of those paradoxical figures who, while seeking to keep the language unchanged, are innovators despite themselves, refining it to its highest degree of sophistication. In this he occupies a place in the Austro-German tradition similar to that occupied by Fauré in the French. As a 'mere' conservative, however, he can stand for all those German and Austrian composers - Franz Schmidt, Hans Pfitzner and Franz Schreker are examples - whom our preoccupation with radicalism, and in particular with the Schoenberg school, has led us to neglect.

But Schoeck is more than merely an interesting historical figure. He is interesting in his own right, and, more to the point, his music deserves to be played. Not all of it: not the late works (with a few exceptions), nor many of the early ones; mainly the fifteen or so dating from the 1920s and early '30s - works such as Venus and Penthesilea from among the operas, and the Elegie and the Notturmo from among the cycles. If they were performed now and again, we might find that Schoeck's music had a meaning for our time after all.