

The Mystery of Modern Dissonance

Even nowadays, the very idea of modern dissonance is still something shrouded in mystery. Many years on from my first recital performances of works by Schönberg, Berg, Gerhard and Di Gesu, such music still tends to be met with suspicion and hostility, as if to be seen as a misstep in an otherwise jolly tonal romp. However, it may be said that no one was as thorough as Schönberg in casting off the idea of tonality, maybe because no one was quite so attached to certain aspects of it as he was. The expressive role of dissonance as part of an opposition consonance-dissonance was the basis for expression and the mainstay for man's perception of music in the West up until the time of the Second Viennese School. Consequently, the ensuing re-definition of resolution engendered a sort of emancipated idea of consonance already foreseen by Wagner which was exploited and developed by the Second Viennese School. The emotional intensity of works by composers of that School (Schönberg, Webern, Berg and Gerhard) would be incomprehensible against a background of traditional diatonic harmony, depending, as it were, on a musical culture it seemed to be bent on eliminating. Yet Schönberg (the principal composer and founder of the Second Viennese School) was not the first composer in history whose style on the one hand made an apparent nonsense of the preceding style, yet selectively retaining aspects of it as deemed essential to its operations. It is interesting to consider that some of the piano compositions performed on this CD - such as Schönberg's *Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke* Opus 19, the *Drei Klavierstücke* Opus 11 and maybe especially Berg's *Sonate* Opus 1 and Gerhard's *Dos Apunts* - with the renunciation of tonality that characterise them within their expressionist context, suggest that out of the aftermath and disillusionment of the First World War the Second Viennese School sought to reconstitute classical forms - for which tonality had been the breeding ground. However, such matters of dissonance occupied other minds than Schönberg's; even Liszt in *Nuages Gris* pursued the logical inference of the dissolution of tonality in high art music of the latter part of the nineteenth century - and curiously the opening motif of *Nuages Gris* is intervallically identical to the opening of Berg's *Sonate* Opus 1, the latter being seemingly dependent so much on a conception of tonality that hints at a world of pure chromaticism reminiscent of Wagner. In Hindemith the free-wheeling dissonance of his work in the 1920s gave way in the 1930s to a determination to bring dissonance to heel in the interests of structural cohesion. In the *Dritte Sonate für Klavier* (1936) with its amazing triple fugue finale, redolent of the ecstatic polyphony of J S Bach, we have here what is an undisputed masterpiece as well as, perhaps, an ascetic compromise between the old and new orders. Furthermore, with Busoni we see a composer who was culturally and spiritually divided, being born in Italy and educated in Germany; he was torn between the two traditions, and probably belonged to neither. This rootlessness provides the key to his highly original work. During his lifetime he won world fame as a pianist of phenomenal technique and perfection of phrasing. The *Sonatina In Diem Nativitatis Christi MCMXVII*, may be classed as "anti-romantic"; its tonal ambiguity and distortion of tonality suggest a glimpse into the future, but it is paradoxically firmly rooted in Bach's polyphonic clarity and serenity. The other Italian composer in this programme of late nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first century music is Di Gesu, whose music stands out in the doldrums of our present musical and cultural malaise. The *Music stamps* (2006) may be described, with a tad of exaggeration, as aphorisms. In their extreme brevity and motivic fragmentation they could be seen as criticisms of more traditional closed forms of works; by their monothematicism are finely wrought, as if by sheer will-power at a cellular level to produce effects with a conciseness and succinctness of perfectly cut jewels. They are expressionistic in character, being highly charged emotionally, and in the fifth of the group, *Blu voraginoso*, there is an astonishing moment of Bachian polyphonic rigour. However, in the *Trilogia dell'assenza* (2000) Di Gesu goes a considerable distance in seeking to dissolve the idea of tonality into a complete chromaticism reminiscent of Skrjabin. ...*Déjà vu...* - the second movement in this set of pieces - is particularly beautiful and is music full of the fascination of dreams and nocturnal visions.

Programme notes provided by Peter Bradley-Fulgoni