

Arnold Schoenberg on Gershwin

11 June 1998

This year marks the centenary of Gershwin's birth. As a tribute, it is fitting to quote the remarkable appreciation written by Arnold Schoenberg in 1938, the year after Gershwin's death. Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), the father of atonalism, was one of the towering and revolutionary figures of 20th century music.

'Many musicians do not consider George Gershwin a serious composer. But they should understand that, serious or not, he is a composer--that is, a man who lives in music and expresses everything, serious or not, sound or superficial, by means of music, because it is his native language. There are a number of composers, serious (as they believe) or not (as I know), who learned to add notes together. But they are only serious on account of a perfect lack of humor and soul.

'It seems to me that this difference alone is sufficient to justify calling the one a composer, but the other none. An artist is to me like an apple tree: When his time comes, whether he wants it or not, he bursts into bloom and starts to produce apples. And as an apple tree neither knows nor asks about the value experts of the market will attribute to its product, so a real composer does not ask whether his products will please the experts of serious arts. He only feels he has to say something; and says it.

'It seems to me beyond doubt that Gershwin was an innovator. What he has done with rhythm, harmony and melody is not merely style. It is fundamentally different from the mannerism of many a serious composer. Such mannerism is based on artificial presumptions, which are gained by speculation and are conclusions drawn from the fashions and aims current among contemporary composers at certain times. Such a style is a superficial union of devices applied to a minimum of idea, without any inner reason or cause. Such music could be taken to pieces and put together in a different way, and the result would be the same nothingness expressed by another mannerism. One could not do this

with Gershwin's music. His melodies are not products of a combination, nor of a mechanical union, but they are units and could therefore not be taken to pieces. Melody, harmony and rhythm are not welded together, but cast. I do not know it, but I imagine, he improvised them on the piano. Perhaps he gave them later the finishing touch; perhaps he spent much time to go over them again and again--I do not know. But the impression is that of an improvisation with all the merits and shortcomings appertaining to this kind of production. Their effect in this regard might be compared to that of an oration which might disappoint you when you read and examine it as with a magnifying glass--you miss what touched you so much, when you were overwhelmed by the charm of the orator's personality. One has probably to add something of one's own to reestablish the first effect. But it is always that way with art--you get from a work about as much as you are able to give to it yourself.

'I do not speak here as a musical theorist, nor am I a critic, and hence I am not forced to say whether history will consider Gershwin a kind of Johann Strauss or Debussy, Offenbach or Brahms, Lehar or Puccini.

'But I know he is an artist and a composer; he expressed musical ideas; and they were new--as is the way in which he expressed them.'

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