SCHOENBERG, by Charles Rosen
Marion Boyars, 1976 (hdbk. £4.50)
Fontana Books, 'Modern Masters' series, 1976 (ppbk. £0.75)

SCHOENBERG, by Malcolm MacDonald
Dent, 'Master Musicians' series, 1976 (£4.25)

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Schoenberg is the most 'discussable' of composers. The musical experience is complex and multi-levelled (we may, so-to-speak, 'move around' within the work) and critical responses have accordingly been divergent. This divergence is apparent even in the technical studies. Take two recent full-length books on the pre-serial compositions: Allen Forte's *The Structure of Atonal Music*[1] and Jan Maegaard's *Studien zur Entwicklung des dodekaphonen Satzes bei Arnold Schönberg.*[2] Both books make use of a sophisticated analytical apparatus to elaborate theories which must be regarded as diametrically opposed: in no realistic sense can we regard them as complementary approaches. They have only one thing in common. They are aimed at a highly specialised market (the average university music student will probably give up after a few pages) and will be of no help at all to the untutored music-lover who genuinely wants to get to grips with music generally recognised as 'difficult'.

It is precisely to this reader that the new studies by Rosen and MacDonald are directed. Yet the approaches taken by these authors are again very different. MacDonald has a word to say about everything Schoenberg wrote, from juvenilia to mature masterpieces. The result is to whet the appetite for some of those works which have somehow eluded us in the past and also to draw attention to the sheer scope and variety of Schoenberg's output: a surprisingly narrow cross-section of his music gets trotted out again and again. A less happy, though inevitable, corollary is the scanty treatment of some major works. A rather different approach would have been necessary in order to do full justice to the Piano Concerto, for instance, or to the String Trio.

It should be said at this stage that MacDonald has the sort of way with words which makes this book a 'good read'. He is intelligent and penetrating on Schoenberg the man and fascinating on the general cultural background, with fresh anecdotal material making the composer come alive where earlier biographies have fallen short. Moreover, with a composer unjustly lumbered with Schoenberg's reputation for cerebration, one can understand the enthusiastic, prosyletising tone and, indeed, regard it as a healthy alternative to that of the more technically-based studies.

At the same time it is difficult to sympathise totally with MacDonald's almost aggressively anti-analysis standpoint. Where a work is successful and coherent, I for one want to know why (not that analysis will provide all the answers). The relationship between structure and expressive effect is certainly complex, but it does permit logical insights. Such technical comment as there is in this book is occasionally suspect (has Op.10 arrived at C major by bar 10?) or inadequate (much of the point of Schoenberg's deliberate re-interpretation of classical variation form in Op.31 seems to have been missed). Nonetheless, the chapter on 'Style', a broad survey of the development of the composer's musical language, is excellent in the main. My slight reservations usually concern comments on 'atonality', a word which, incidentally, MacDonald refuses to acknowledge, where most of us are content to accept it as a term — in search of definition no doubt — which is with us 'for better or for worse'. His discussion of residual tonal qualities in 'atonality' fails to differentiate between tonality as a controlling force in structure (implying a repertory of scalic and/or chordal types) and, more simply, as a stabilising or referential centre. Equally, it doesn't really take into account the very different *harmonic* qualities which distinguish the early serial works from those written between 1909 and 1913. This is not hair-splitting. The distinctions are real and important, and in order to clarify them a more close-to-the-text kind of analysis would have been necessary.

Such an approach is to be found in Rosen's book. There is no attempt here at a comprehensive survey. The method, rather, is to focus closely on selected corners of Schoenberg's output, corners which have the widest possible significance for his music as a whole, and indeed beyond that. You will find no more lucid and cogent account of the meaning of classical tonality and of its subsequent expansion than pp.36-41 of Rosen. Here, as elsewhere, he reveals a rare capacity for enclosing precise technical comment, invariably peppered with fresh insights, within an eminently readable narrative. I might cite as just one example of these fresh insights the account he gives of those 'large blocks of prefabricated material' which we find in a classical music and of the changing attitudes of 19th century composers towards them. All this by way of introduction to the works written between 1909 and 1913, for Rosen the really challenging works in Schoenberg's output. It would hardly compliment the author to summarise the precise and subtle way in which he demonstrates how 'the expressive values of the stylistic elements were asked to play a structural role' in this music. Enough to say that in a short study addressed to a wide readership (Schoenberg is the first composer to enter the Fontana 'Modern Masters' series), he unveils more of the true significance of these pre-serial works, including *Erwartung,* than many an earnest page of *Perspectives of New Music* etc.

This discussion of 'Atonality' forms one of the two major chapters in Rosen's book. The second, which he calls 'Serialism and Neo-classicism' is no less penetrating. Here he pinpoints — much more precisely and with much greater insight than Boulez — the real reasons for the difficulties experienced by so many listeners (including, I must confess, myself) with this music. The two chapters depend to an extent on premises outlined in an introductory chapter on 'Expressionism', in itself a fascinating discourse on the nature of the 'language' of music, a discourse whose significance reaches far beyond Schoenberg. It is rare and encouraging to find a writer on music who can present complex and 'loaded' ideas in a form which is at once compressed and readable; who can support (as I feel he must) his hypotheses by means of precise technical information while avoiding the pseudo-scientific jargon rightly condemned by MacDonald.

NOTES:

[1]New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.
[2]Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen, 1972.