

Modern Music (1924-1946)

The quarterly journal was published in New York, first under the title *League of Composers Review* from February 1924 through January 1925. In May 1925 the title was changed to *Modern Music* [MMU] and publication continued uninterrupted under this name until the journal's final issue of Fall 1946. The purpose of the journal was to inform American professional musicians and the American (and European) public about the new idioms and styles of twentieth-century music.

In the first two years of publication, the *League of Composers Review* was issued three times annually; and thereafter, as *Modern Music* beginning with Vol. III, no. 1 (November-December 1925) four times annually. The new schedule followed the North American and European winter-spring concert season from November-December through May-June. The publication schedule changed for the journal's final year: the four issues of Vol. XXIII were printed entirely in 1946.¹ While issues in the first years contained thirty to forty pages each, the issues were soon enlarged to an average of sixty-eight pages. A table of contents is given for each issue on its title page. Yearly comprehensive collective indices to back numbers² appear from 1926 through 1935. Joel Liffanfer provides an index for the years 1924 through 1935.³ In 1976, Wayne D. Shirley prepared an "analytical index" to the complete journal.⁴ Each issue concludes with short biographical notes under the heading "Contributors to this issue." The journal contains no advertisements.

Founded by Edgard Varèse, Carlos Salzedo and Charles Ruggles, the International Composers' Guild (1921-1927)⁵ was created to promote modern music. However, restrictions imposed by the Guild—and most importantly the obligation to perform only previously unperformed works—led to a great deal of dissention and ultimately to the defection of a number of members⁶ who founded the League of Composers.⁷ Among these were Claire Reis, Alma Wertheim and Minna Lederman, and composers Arthur Bliss, Louis Gruenberg, Leo Orenstein, Lazare Saminsky, Emerson Whithorne and Chalmers Clifton. The goals of the League of Composers were varied but emphasized the promotion of contemporary music and musicians by means of sponsorship of concerts

¹ From Vol. I, no. 1 (February 1924) to Vol. IX, no. 4, (May-June 1932), each issue was assigned a discrete series of page numbers beginning with page 1. The page numbering of Vol. X, no. 1 (November-December 1932) through Volume X, no. 4 (May-June 1933) was changed to number the pages of all four issues of each volume consecutively beginning with page 1. This practice was continued until the journal's demise in 1946.

² Named "Index," these lists are a reprinting of each issue's "Table of Contents."

³ See *Modern Music*, Vol. XII, no. 4 (May-June 1935).

⁴ Wayne D. Shirley, *Modern Music Published by the League of Composers, 1924-1946: an Analytic Index*. Compiled by Wayne D. Shirley; ed. by William and Carolyn Lichtenwanger (New York, 1976).

⁵ *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, s.v. "International Composers' Guild."

⁶ Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland 1900 through 1940* (New York, 1984): 117.

⁷ *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, s.v. "League of Composers."

featuring contemporary music, commission of new compositions from European and American composers, and publication of the *League of Composers Review* and *Modern Music* as a forum for articles and reviews about contemporary musical events.⁸ According to the editor Minna Lederman, "*Modern Music* had no fixed editorial position about any composer, any movement. Its pages recorded derogatory opinions about, as well as homage to, even the greatest figures of the age—Schoenberg and Stravinsky, who were under its most constant observation."⁹

Each issue of the journal is divided into two parts. The first contains a series of informative articles dealing with the promotion and concerns of contemporary music in the three decades of the journal's publication, and, more specifically, biographies of the leading composers and analyses of their principal works; reports on conditions for music performance and publication in Europe, the Soviet Union and the Americas; the politics of music brought about by the threat and reality of various forms of fascism; explanations of new compositional methods; and descriptions of new ballets and operas. With rare exceptions all articles are signed, and, almost every issue contains a reproduction of a portrait or sketch of a featured composer, drawings of stage and costume designs, and photographs of contemporary productions.

The second section contains reviews, and was initially titled "Brief Comment and Review," until November 1924 (Vol. I, no. 3) when the title became "Forecast and Review." Within this section, there are a number of columns that appear regularly. First are reviews of contemporary compositions performed in the major musical centers of the United States and in the capitals of Europe and South America. It must be emphasized that the interpretive and technical skills of performers are not the subjects of these reviews. Rather *Modern Music's* reviewers deal almost exclusively with specific compositions and the analysis of the compositional methods.¹⁰ The reviews are followed by the "Scores and Records" column in which the production, growth and availability of contemporary music, both recorded and in print, are examined. Recordings of works by American and European twentieth-century composers, made by the Victor and Columbia record companies are featured. Thereafter follows the "Over the Air" column that chronicles both the rise and fall of modern music in radio broadcasting, and the growth of the network giants in the United States, such as the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), the Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS), and the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

The new technology of the late 1920s, which gave birth to motion pictures with sound is dealt with in the "On the Film Front" column, as are methods of composing for film, and

⁸ See references in notes 5 and 7.

⁹ Minna Lederman, *The Life and Death of a Small Magazine* (*Modern Music, 1924-1946*) (New York, 1983): 140.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 5.

scores written for films produced in the United States, Europe and the Soviet Union. The great interest in contemporary dance is reflected in the column "With the Dancers" which deals with a wide range of related subjects including composers, choreographers, directors, dancers and the public. There is also a column devoted to jazz and popular music, "The Torrid Zone." Books about music, the ballet and the opera are reviewed in the final section.

Throughout the journal's run, the following writers, among numerous others, contributed regularly to the same columns: Donald Fuller to New York concert reports; Colin McPhee to published music and recordings; Charles Mills to radio broadcasting; and George Antheil and Paul Bowles to film reviews. The extensive list of occasional contributors of both articles and reviews includes Elliott Carter, John Cage, Marc Blitzstein, Henry Cowell, Lehman Engel and Marion Bauer, to name a few. Among the more regularly encountered European contributors are Boris de Schoelzer, Alfredo Casella, Darius Milhaud, Edwin Evans and Humphrey Searle.

Aaron Copland was an active participant in the affairs of the League of Composers, and a contributor to *Modern Music* who played an important, supportive role to the editor. Minna Lederman relates that Copland "introduced me to many of the composers of his generation who, writing for *Modern Music*, became famous as composer-critics, a new departure for America."¹¹ Copland's own writings include studies of composers George Antheil, Charles Ives and Darius Milhaud, as well as contributions on jazz structure, Hollywood film composers, and South American composers.

The activities of native-born American composers and resident immigrants in the United States are of prime importance in the journal. A series titled "American Composers," consisting of twenty-one biographical sketches with lists of important compositions and a portrait or sketch, is featured from 1930 through 1946. Treated in the series are, among others, Louis Gruenberg, John Alden Carpenter, Charles Ives, Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, Walter Piston and Samuel Barber. The development of American modern music is recorded in detail throughout the journal: topics include the radicalism of Ruggles, Ives, Varèse and Cowell, the Americanization of the symphony by Sessions, William Schuman and Roy Harris, and the innovations of composers such as Carpenter, Copland, Gruenberg and Bernstein, all directly influenced by jazz and popular music.

Studies of the many European twentieth-century composers—Schoenberg, Bartók, Hindemith, Stravinsky and many others—fill a large part of the journal's first years. Paul Stefan discusses Schoenberg's operas; Erwin Stein investigates Schoenberg's inheritance and development of German music; and Hugo Leichtentritt examines Schoenberg's tonal and atonal compositions, while Paul Pisk explains Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique. Bartók and Kodály's integration of Eastern European folk music into the traditional

¹¹ "Minna Lederman Daniel" in Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, op. cit.: 112-13.

European genres is discussed by Adjioran Orvos and Kodály himself. An entire supplement to the May-June 1932 issue is dedicated to Willi Reich's monograph on Berg's *Wozzeck*. The many articles about Stravinsky's neoclassicism parallel the American premières of a number of his ballets and symphonic works. Also of note is the information about contemporary composers and their compositions found in the journal's reports on the annual festival held in major European centers by the International Society for Contemporary Music, and American festivals held in Rochester and at the Yadoo artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York.

The rise of fascism in Europe is accounted for in reports from Germany, Austria, Italy and France.¹² In particular, the Nazi's interference in the art world receives much attention including the decrees affecting cultural life, Goebbels's conflict with conductor Furtwängler and the exclusion of Jewish composers and performers. A number of these articles are the work of well-known European musicologists and critics, some of whom fled the dangers of fascism in Germany, Austria and Central Europe, and eventually emigrated to the United States. Their studies deal with philosophical questions about matters of political importance to the contemporary world. Alfred Einstein discusses the incompatibility of the arts with technology,¹³ the banishment of operas in Germany that exploited non-Nazi ideals,¹⁴ and raises questions about the longevity of the "modern music" movement.¹⁵ Paul Stefan, a noted writer on music and editor of the Austrian music journal *Musikblätter des Anbruch* from 1921 to 1938, deals with Schoenberg's operas,¹⁶ Berg's *Wozzeck*,¹⁷ and the effect of both the great depression and the menace of the Nazis on Austria's musical life.¹⁸

American composers wrote many important articles about composers and modern music throughout the journal's run. Virgil Thomson writes about Kurt Weil and Lotte Lenya. Roger Sessions deals with Bloch, Stravinsky and Hindemith and introduces Heinrich Schenker's analytical theories to American readers. Frederick Jacobi writes in defense of "modernism," Gershwin, Sessions, Sibelius and the popular music of Jerome Kern. Experimental composer Henry Cowell offers thoughts on musical notation, terminology, and neo-primitivism. Elliott Carter contributes reviews of concerts, incidental music for plays, film scores and music for the dance. George Antheil writes the quarterly column

¹²Yannick Simon reports that several articles from French journals published during the Occupation also appeared in *Modern Music* [*Fontes Artis Musicae* 49, 1-2 (January-June 2002): 8].

¹³Alfred Einstein, "Art and Technology," *MMU* XII, 2 (January-February 1935): 55-61.

¹⁴Alfred Einstein, "German Opera, Past and Present," *MMU* XI, 2 (January-February 1934): 65-72.

¹⁵Alfred Einstein, "Will Modern Music Endure?" *MMU* XIV, 3 (March-April 1937): 119-23.

¹⁶Paul Stefan, "Schoenberg's Operas," *MMU* II, 1 (June 1925): 12-15; and, VII, 1 (December-January 1930): 24-28.

¹⁷Paul Stefan, "*Wozzeck*, an Atonal Opera," *MMU* III, 3 (March-April 1926): 38-40.

¹⁸Paul Stefan, "Vienna Resists Depression," *MMU* IX, 3 (March-April 1932): 127-30; and, "Vienna Menaced but not Doomed," *MMU* XI, 4 (May-June 1934): 196-99.

the “Hollywood front,” discussing many film scores and offering advice to composers about the technique of writing for film.

Twentieth-century composers show great interest in the ballet, a fact made clear in *Modern Music* in articles, reviews and many reproductions of sketches and drawings of ballet scenery and costumes. While Stravinsky’s ballets are prominent, with focus on their compositional complexities; ballets by Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Carpenter, Piston, Bliss, Bernstein and many others are also discussed. Many scores written specifically for major ballet companies—including the Ballets Russes of Diaghilev, the Ballet Theatre, the Sadler’s Wells Ballet Company and the productions of Ida Rubinstein and Martha Graham—receive attention.

The musical life of the Soviet Union is studied in twenty articles and in book and film reviews by a number of well-known writers on Russian subjects: Boris de Schloezer, Victor Belaiev, Leonid Sebaneyev, and Georgi Schneerson. A number of these articles first appeared in official Soviet publications and are given in translation. Topics treated include the development of the proletarian composer, the professional organization of Soviet composers, and socialist realism in music. Compositions by the leading Russian and Soviet composers—Scriabin, Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Shebalin—are also discussed. Shostakovich’s own article about the composition of his controversial opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* is an issue feature, complete with music excerpts and the reproduction of photographs of the 1934 Nemirovitch Dantchenko Moscow production. During World War II, Russian film scores and Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony are treated in the journal’s reviews.

After having produced *Modern Music* almost single-handedly in cramped quarters in her parents’ home, Minna Lederman petitioned the League of Composers’ board for greater financial assistance. Despite small measures by the League during the last three years of the journal’s life, and efforts to raise funds by donation, publication of *Modern Music* ceased with the fourth issue of 1946.¹⁹

¹⁹ For details of the journal’s demise see Lederman, op. cit., 187-202.