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-the first of two pages-

Stravinsky Previsions a New Music

Russian Composer Extols the Player-Piano and Its Auto Soul,

IGOR STRAVINSKY, acclaimed as the most distinguished, if not the greatest, of living composers, now sojourning in America after an absence of ten years, ardently advocates and practises the composition of mechanical music—of not merely piano music, that is, which can be played on an automatic instrument, but music composed without purpose of performance by hand, designed for the player-piano solely, and intended to take advantage of characteristics and limitations inherent in an instrument operated by a perforated roll of paper. He regards the player-piano as a distinct instrument; not by any means an instrument to absorb his energies, but nevertheless a means of making legitimate music in a new way. In the *N. Y. Times Magazine* he says:

“There is a new polyphonic truth in the player-piano. There are new possibilities. It is something more. It is not the same thing as the piano. The player-piano resembles the piano, but it also resembles the orchestra. It shares the soul of the automobile. Beside the piano it is practical. It has a future, yes. It has its utility. Men will write for it. But it will create new matter for itself. Not a new manner, no. New matter. . . .

“I was the first to try it. That was in 1917, in London. I wrote a study that was not for the piano but for the player-piano and for nothing else—an attempt to see what could be done with the whole keyboard available to one's will.”

The étude for the player-piano was no jest, we are assured, but an effort at expression in a new medium of unknown resources. It was an experiment in a new medium, taking the player-piano on its own merits. M. B. Levick writes interpretatively in the *Times*:

“Stravinsky was moved by no perverse flippancy. While others flirt with the quarter-tone scale, he stands by the accepted scale. ‘I have plenty now,’ he says; ‘I do not have to search.’ While others make bizarre experiments, Stravinsky calls the ultra-modern of contemporary music too formulated. He goes to eighteenth-century manuscripts to study Bach, that he may see what Bach did before men took to editing him, and in his latest concerto he writes in the contrapuntal style, like Bach himself. But what would Bach, who had no use even for the piano, have said of the player-piano?”

“As he expounds his musical creed discursively, Stravinsky, in passing, cites a player-piano roll as a horrible example, both



A REVOLUTIONARY COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky discovers and proclaims a “new polyphonic truth in the piano-player . . . for which composers will write directly.”

-the second of two pages-

in time and in expression. Perhaps he is thinking not of the roll itself and its instrument, but of some hypothetical operator who has mistaken the player-piano for a treadmill. The steady tramp of perforated notes would, in itself, hold less than nothing for a serious composer who studies jazz in its nocturnal fountain springs.

“Stravinsky has, none the less, taken a step further in the new form—or toward this new form—of a music distinct to the player-piano. Stravinsky the pianist cannot do for Stravinsky the composer what the player-piano can do for him.

“‘There are tone combinations beyond my ten fingers,’ he says. It is these he seeks to perpetuate by working over the interpretative rolls. ‘The rolls such as Paderewski has made of his splendid work are photographs, but I make lithographs.

New combinations are there for the whole keyboard.’”

In other words, for the better understanding of the layman: Take a chord that embraces an octave, the highest and the lowest tones making a distance of eight white keys in all. Now what if the composer wishes to use a tone four keys still further on? The hand will not reach. He could change the chord, bring the desired unattainable key down to the corresponding tone within the original octave. But with the player-piano he need not make the change; he can write the music as he conceives it, for the whole in the paper can come four keys above, or forty for that matter, as easily as not.