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ERWIN SCHULHOFF: A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR TODAY'S COMPOSERS IN THE SEARCH FOR PERSONAL STYLE

I. Introduction

In previous centuries, music was often confined within the boundaries of a predominant aesthetic. In today's world, the musical landscape is permeated by a multitude of styles, genres, and aesthetics, offering us a wealth of diverse works to enjoy, ranging from the avant-garde compositions of Lachenmann to the energetic rock of AC/DC and the captivating pop of Beyoncé. This dynamic mosaic of musical expressions, which began at the turn of the 20th century with the simultaneous development of Impressionism, Dodecaphonism, jazz, and other influential movements and genres, brought both liberation and challenges to composers. While it opened doors to limitless creative possibilities, it also posed complicated challenges for composers who explored the wide world of musical expression and tried to find their own voice. Today, young composers face a comparable, if not more complex, dilemma when deciding on the "style" for their next composition. Composers are exposed to a myriad of musical styles and aesthetics, each possessing its own allure and purpose. With so many styles of music to choose from, a question inevitably arises: "How can we find a personal voice amidst the vast plethora of musical styles?" When we reflect upon the early 20th century, we find that composer Erwin Schulhoff (1894–1942) encountered a similar situation to the one faced by countless composers to-

day. However, despite the emergence of various new aesthetics during his time, Schulhoff successfully forged his own unique voice. By exploring Schulhoff's life and music, this essay aims to provide insights into the process of developing a distinct artistic voice. In doing so, it seeks to inspire young composers in their pursuit of finding their own creative identity amidst the vast and diverse musical landscape of today.

II. Schulhoff's Search for a Personal Language

Schulhoff's life can be divided into four distinct creative periods, three of which will be discussed in this essay. The fourth and final period, characterized by his political inclination towards communism, falls outside the scope of this discussion.

Erwin Schulhoff, born in Prague in 1894 to a Czech-German family, displayed a deep passion for music and the piano from a young age. His first creative period, extending from his initial composition in 1902 to one year after the conclusion of the First World War in 1919, was marked by a strong influence of Post-Romantic music, with notable inspiration drawn from the works of Richard Strauss. Many of Schulhoff's works display parallels with Strauss's harmony and orchestration, evident in compositions like *Drei Lieder für Sopranstimme und Klavier* (WV 33)¹ and *Landschaften* (WV 44). However, Schulhoff's curiosity as a composer led him to explore and draw inspiration from other musical expressions of his time. During his studies in Leipzig and Cologne between 1908 and 1913, Schulhoff encountered the transformative music of Scriabin and Debussy.² In particular, the harmonic innovations of Debussy had a profound impact on Schulhoff's musical language, which became increasingly evident in his compositions. Works such as *Vier Bilder für Klavier* (WV 22) and *Fünf Impressionen für Klavier* (WV 29) exemplify Schulhoff's incorporation of Impressionist elements best.

After serving as a soldier on multiple fronts during the First World War, Schulhoff's musical language underwent a significant transformation, signaling the start of his second creative phase. This period, spanning approximately from 1919 to 1923, is distinguished by a three-pronged exploration. On one hand, he

1 WV stands for "Werkeverzeichnis" (work catalogue) which is the catalogue of Schulhoff's works. This comprehensive catalogue was created by Josef Bek, a pioneer in Schulhoff research and the author of the biography titled *Erwin Schulhoff: Leben und Werk*. Within the catalogue, you can find both published and unpublished works, as well as unfinished sketches and compositions from Schulhoff's student years. The works in the catalogue are systematically numbered in chronological order, with the date of completion serving as the determining factor for their classification.

2 Josef Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff: Leben und Werk* (Hamburg: von Bockel, 1994), 24.

delved into Free Atonality, drawing inspiration from the German Expressionist composers of the Second Viennese School. Simultaneously, Schulhoff began incorporating melodies, harmonies, and rhythms from the newly arrived jazz genre in Europe into his compositions. Finally, he also ventured into the realm of the Dadaist movement, resulting in bold, satirical, and unconventional approaches to composition. For Schulhoff, jazz and Dadaism often became synonymous, as he utilized jazz to convey Dadaist ideas while maintaining Expressionism as a distinct and unique concept. Some of the most well-known pieces from that time include the Expressionist *Zehn Klavierstücke* (WV 50), and the Dadaist *Fünf Pittoresken für Klavier* (WV 51), which features four jazz-inspired movements and one satirical silent piece of music titled “In Futurum”³

In both the first and second periods, we witness Schulhoff’s unwavering pursuit to discover his personal artistic voice by incorporating the diverse styles and genres of his time. Schulhoff’s engagement with these innovative musical forms demonstrates his willingness to push boundaries and embrace the evolving artistic landscape of his era. However, it is notable that the music composed during these periods sometimes gives the impression that Schulhoff is intentionally adopting a particular style to convey his ideas. Nevertheless, a significant shift was about to take place in the subsequent period.

In 1923, following a period of several years in Germany, Schulhoff made the decision to return to his hometown of Prague. This homecoming reignited his passion for the folk traditions and musical heritage of his country. Under the profound influence of Janáček’s works, Schulhoff’s compositions experienced a significant transformation, embracing distinct folk elements such as dance motifs, modal melodies, and mixed meters.⁴ The lively third movement of his composition *Fünf Stücke für Streichquartett* (WV 68), titled “Alla Czecha”, exemplifies this renewed passion for Czech music best. The year 1924 marks the onset of Schulhoff’s third creative period, marked by a synthesis of avant-garde styles such as Impressionism, Neoclassicism, and jazz, along with a revitalized focus on the folk elements of his homeland. This period signifies Schulhoff’s artistic maturity, exemplified by the development of a distinct and idiosyncratic style that arises from the fusion and integration of diverse artistic influences. In other words, Schulhoff succeeded in forging his own artistic voice by amalgamating

3 It is worth mentioning that *Fünf Pittoresken* represents a double novelty. Firstly, it stands as one of the earliest “classical” compositions in Europe to consistently incorporate jazz elements, with Igor Stravinsky’s *Piano-Rag-Music* (KV032) preceding Schulhoff’s work by only a few months in 1919. Secondly, the third movement, “In Futurum”, is one of the rare instances of a silent piece of music predating John Cage’s conceptual piece *4’33”*. In this regard, Schulhoff’s *Fünf Pittoresken* holds a significant place in the annals of Western music history, serving as a notable milestone.

4 Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff: Leben und Werk*, 62–66.

the elements of the music he admired into a distinctive and personal blend. A closer analysis of both violin sonatas allows for a deeper understanding of the contrast between them. The first violin sonata, *Sonate für Violine und Klavier* (WV 24), composed in 1913 during Schulhoff's first creative period, demonstrates a distinct contrast between its movements, each showcasing the influence of different styles. The first movement is characterized by elements of Post-Romanticism and even Expressionism, while the second movement exhibits an Impressionistic quality. The final two movements lean towards a Neoclassical style. In contrast, the second violin sonata, *Sonate pour violon et piano* (WV 91), composed in 1927 during Schulhoff's third creative period, consists of four distinct movements, yet they are all written in one cohesive and unified style. The difference is subtle, yet crucial: the first sonata is eclectic, incorporating various styles, while the second sonata embodies a single style composed of different stylistic elements. In both cases, the heterogeneous quality of Schulhoff's music is preserved, but in the second sonata it has been developed into a distinctive style. Consequently, within a musical landscape teeming with new and flourishing styles, Schulhoff managed to carve out his own distinctive artistic language.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, Schulhoff's life and music serve as a compelling and enduring source of inspiration and encouragement for composers in today's world. With a global population of eight billion people and an expansive and diverse musical landscape, the challenge of finding a personal artistic voice may seem more complex than ever before. However, Schulhoff's legacy stands as a powerful reminder that the pursuit of an idiosyncratic artistic voice is attainable even amidst a myriad of musical styles. Just as Schulhoff fearlessly integrated folk, jazz, and various other stylistic elements into his compositions during the early 20th century, composers of today are afforded the freedom to venture into a diverse spectrum of musical genres, ranging from Lachenmann to AC/DC, Beyoncé, and beyond. By cultivating curiosity, embracing openness to new ideas, and persistently seeking inspiration from the multitude of emerging styles, composers can embark on a transformative journey that propels them towards the discovery of their own unique and authentic creative voice.