

FARTEIN VALEN AND SERIALISM

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The Norwegian composer Fartein Valen deserves to be heard.

He lived from 1887 to 1952 and was a pupil of Max Bruch.

Valen was born in Stavanger on 25 August 1887 but spent his early years, about five of them, in Madagascar. His parents were Christian missionaries. He studied at the Oslo Conservatory between 1906 and 1909 before going to Berlin for the next four years where he studied composition with Max Bruch. After his mother's death, he visited Paris and Rome. For twelve years from 1927, he was the Music Librarian for Oslo University. He mastered nine languages. He loved nature, cats and cultivated roses. He never married.

He became what might be described as an independent, a composer who cannot be pigeon-holed into a type.

It is a very great pity that people must classify composers into categories. A great deal of injustice has resulted in this damaging and puerile quest.

From the 1920s Valen developed a serial technique of his own. The serial technique cannot be described simply but, basically, the composer takes all 12 notes of the chromatic scale and for each new work or movement of a work, arranges them in an order of his choice to make a 12 note row which could be called the theme. Each of the twelve notes are used once on each appearance. They can be played backwards to make a second theme and this is called the retrograde version. The basic row and the retrograde can be played upside down thus making inversions. The harmony is based on the row.

People object to this, dismissing it as a mere method or formulae and therefore lacking in inspiration. But the fugue and the canon were also methods and formulae and these baroque forms. And so it is unfair to criticise serialism, or dodecaphonic music to give it its proper name, and ignore the same comments for old-fashioned devices in earlier music.

Music that is not written in a key, whether or not a key signature is used, and where all 12 notes are equal and there is no tonality is called atonal but not all atonal music can be called serial music. Not all serial music is strict to the accepted pattern. Alban Berg used a 12-note series in his Violin Concerto and yet it still has a tonal feel about it. Humphrey Searle in his magnificent Symphony no, I used a four note series based on the musical notes for BACH and then repeated it twice at different pitches to make a 12 note series. That takes a lot of work and dedication. The question is often asked, why did composers turn to serialism? The answer is obvious.

The diatonic scale is really only seven notes. For example, if you take the scale of D this comprises D, E, F sharp, G, A, B, C sharp. Making a melody out of seven notes is restricted to how many ways you can arrange those seven notes differently and this melody is limited even when you use accidentals, that is to say notes not in the scale. If you consider the vast outputs of Haydn and Mozart one could reasonably say that these composers used up all the permutations of the diatonic scales in their thousands, if not millions, of melodies. It could be argued therefore that diatonic melody is all used up.

This is further evidenced by the fact that has not escaped any serious music lover that themes, diatonic melodies, sound very similar between works even those of differing composers. This is why we can say with truth that some works sound very much the same as others.

Valen made his discoveries around 1913 and independently. It was common sense to them. He made his own investigations and was drawn to the genius of Schoenberg.

Independent composers are usually the most original. There simply is no point in composers writing the same sort of music that has been composed time and time again. In my article [What Makes a Great Composer?](#) (available on this website) I argue that originality is an essential requirement for a great composer.

I could relate many examples of composers who have had first performances and then be told that a passage in their work sounds like so and so and, as a result, the composer has revised his score to take out the offending passage.

Valen developed a serial technique of his very own. Sometimes he would introduce mere fragments of his basic row and, as originally written, without transposition. There were times when he did not use serial chords as I have explained earlier.

It must not be taken that serial or atonal composers avoid all classical devices. Valen had a rich contrapuntal skill. For Valen the serial method was an architectural starting point. Valen wrote in lines and so one can call him a linear composer. Valen often uses his serial elements as thematic material. Nowhere is this more evident than in his superb and very powerful Violin Concerto.

The opening is very beautiful with long thematic lines with the violin often soaring sweetly. The mood is largely one of resignation or introspection yet the music is never dull. It may at times resemble the Berg yet the Valen retains one style and is therefore more satisfying. The orchestration is first class, magical and warmly mellow. There is no pomposity or grand empty gestures. It is natural music in a glorious rich atonality. Ten minutes or so into the concerto, comes a strange sort of spirituality which is profound and deeply moving.

The Piano Concerto is different. Technically it is not a concerto in the true sense of the word and it is very brief making it doubly unattractive for a pianist in a concert hall, I would think. The Variations for piano op. 23 has a classical manner and a twelve-note theme followed by its retrograde but the harmonies are not based on the series.

Valen had an understanding of beauty and recalled Schiller saying, Even what is beautiful has to die. In memory of his friend the painter Anselm Feuerbach he composed the orchestral piece Nenia Op 18 no 1. Valen was also interested in literature and in 1922 he visited John Keats grave in Rome. In 1933 Valen composed an orchestral work To Hope based on Keats poem. During the war Valen was almost a recluse on the family farm at Valevag. This isolation was common among Norwegians at this time and as long as Valen has his life's elixir, that is to say coffee beans, he seemed to be content.

The Symphony no 2 Op 40 was written between 1941 and 1944 and is in four movements Allegro con brio, Adagio, Allegretto and Allegro molto. It last about 24 minutes. The second movement was inspired by Rembrandt's Christ in Emmaus a reproduction of which Valen possessed...

1944 to 1946 were the years of his Symphony no 3 which lasts about 20 minutes. The four movements are Allegro moderato, Larghetto, Intermezzo (an allegretto) and a final allegro.

Both symphonies use his individual serialism and are extremely impressive. If Berg's music has warmth this music is red-hot!

The Symphony no. 4 is an intense piece but not brain crushing. The glowing string writing is a joy and I do like the way the composer makes his statements and then shuts up. He does not hang around and give long-winded endings but the endings are as natural as direct conversation as exemplified by the

master Webern. A fifth symphony was left unfinished at the time of his death in Valevaag on 14 December 1952.

Valen is a composer worth our attention one who used classical forms (there is a fugue in the String Quartet no. 2) and whose work should be carefully studied, particularly his orchestral piece, Sonnets of Michelangelo. He was a composer who was independent and did not kow-tow to the acceptable norm. Indeed, he is the first truly original Norwegian composer of note.

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