

PARIS—THE SURVIVAL OF FRENCH MUSIC

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HOW shall I ever forget the doubts that could not fail but come to mind, amid all our sorrow and distress, when I returned to Paris towards the end of August, 1940!

Music at that time seemed remote from everything occupying our attention. During our country's terrible bereavement, the very thought of things that only the day before had still seemed essential was somehow insupportable, even odious. Today it is useless, I believe, to dwell at length on that. It can be too easily understood and explained. But there was, nevertheless, a very serious and difficult situation for those of us who were musicians, a situation which we had to face without discouragement. From the ruins of all we had before been so passionately attached to, would it not soon be necessary to try to salvage something with a chance for survival?

Weeks passed — and what they brought at first was scarcely calculated to give us much hope. Composers whom we knew to be among our best found themselves suddenly excluded from artistic life. The great name of Paul Dukas was on the forbidden list. Darius Milhaud himself had the good fortune to escape in time but it was long before we were to hear again the bold and heartening example of his work. Jacques Ibert, victim of an absurd slanderous campaign, retired far from Paris and was obliged to maintain a silence which, however, only increased his stature. Many of our best interpreters found themselves in the same situation. The instrumental classes at the Conservatoire were in their turn subjected to the "racial" laws rapidly adopted by the Vichy government at the instigation of their German masters.

When our great symphonic ensembles decided to open their doors again, we were in for some curious surprises. For example, the "Concerts Colonne" had changed their name over night and became the "Concerts Gabriel Pierné." It had been discovered that the celebrated founder, Édouard Colonne, was a Jew. . . But their conductor, Paul Paray, refused

for four years to conduct a single performance of the Concerts Pierné. He too chose to live in the Midi, whence he returned only after the liberation, to be welcomed by a public which clearly understood the significance of a position taken with such courage and dignity.

However, as time passed, it became clear that music would be called on to take a far more important place than we had dared hope at first. Was it not, in the midst of our daily anguish, one of the best, the surest of refuges? We realized this at the first performances by our orchestras in October 1940, and even more with the success of the Association des Concerts du Conservatoire directed by Charles Münch.

For a long time we had been aware of Münch's courage, of the passion with which he devoted himself to an often difficult task. The arrangement of his programs, the way he conducted them, the independence of his attitude in the midst of the petty quarrels of our musical world, all gave him a unique position. But the public at large seemed to understand this for the first time in that winter of 1940, when his name alone was enough to crowd the immense auditorium of the Palais du Chaillot to the last available seat. From this season on Münch's success has been one of the most brilliant on record. Every Sunday for four years he brought escape to an enthusiastic crowd, a few hours of liberation to an oppressed and saddened Paris.

We heard the classics and the moderns, as well as some virtuosi who, thanks to Münch, won an indisputable success. The young pianist, Nicole Henriot, was quickly recognized as among our most promising. He now attracts all the informed listeners of our capital, a fact it is a pleasure to record, since there are few whose qualities stand out so clearly.

Like the Palais du Chaillot, all our large concert halls were to draw passionate audiences of eager and attentive music-lovers. Two artists in particular developed an unusually zealous following. The composer, Francis Poulenc, had the happy idea of joining forces with the singer, Pierre Bernac. Their recitals of contemporary song have rapidly achieved a rare and unquestioned success. The quality of the works they selected, the perfect preparation, and their intelligent interpretations are now recognized by everyone. No one will forget, either, the fine courage they have always displayed in rejecting the least compromise, the least concession, the least hint of propaganda. At a time when, sad to relate, some of their well-known colleagues had the effrontery to appear in the German studio of "Radio-Paris," this pair were performing some unpublished

music by Poulenc which he had set to poems by Louis Aragon, in defiance of enemy censorship. (In 1943 Poulenc composed an equally beautiful and forceful cantata, *Figure Humaine*, to a series of texts by Paul Eluard, among them the admirable *Liberté*.)

Now for the names of some young composers who, in spite of an uncertainty and difficulty scarcely favorable to the development of a free and independent art, have succeeded nevertheless in attracting the attention of all those who have kept their faith in our music.

Some time before 1939 I had been much impressed by Oliver Messiaen, the pupil of Paul Dukas, and a remarkable organist. His fresh inspiration and extremely personal accent at once compelled attention. I was aware of the influences that are obvious in his work. A certain atmosphere reflected from several pages of *Le Martyre de Saint Sebastien*, that much under-estimated masterpiece by our great Debussy; a taut and sharp harmonic idiom of which the Interlude in *Le Sacre du Printemps* by Stravinsky brought us the first examples in 1913; the systematic use of exotic modes whose color and character here add a curious, captivating element. But Messiaen's own genius (and I believe it right to use the word in his connection) overshadows the reminiscences of other music I have mentioned here not at all in the spirit of criticism. Debussy and Stravinsky themselves started out like all great creators, by submitting to so many influences that their own can now be passed on without serious damage. In my opinion, Oliver Messiaen is a case in kind. His recent works often rise high, and they hold us even while we are reminded of those tendencies he represents with such brilliance. The tension of his mysticism sometimes arouses justifiable alarm. Unfortunately he embellishes some of his most beautiful productions with commentaries in a rather regrettable literary style. Nevertheless the importance of these works is considerable and I shall be much surprised if we have not, in Oliver Messiaen, one of the future masters of French music.

Of quite a different character is the art of Henri Sauguet. We had known his ballets, especially *La Chatte* composed for Diaghilev and produced with such remarkable success. Shortly before 1939, the Paris Opéra gave the first performance of his *Chartreuse de Parme*. His music showed rare and attractive qualities. Without once trying to shock or surprise, these amiable compositions, delicate, and of a keen and ingenious wit, happily carried on in one of the better veins of our national art. *La Gageure Imprévue*, presented in 1944 by the Opéra Comique, confirmed

all our expectations. It was acclaimed spontaneously and almost unanimously. Here is a voice of our own which will be listened to by others – and that is probably one of the reasons why we applauded with unreserved pleasure.

Of concerts, performers, and composers, I have here written only too briefly to do justice to their beneficent role during the hard unprofitable years we have just survived. Obviously I have not been able to name all who deserve mention. I have confined myself to what seemed the most essential. But let us not forget that during the same period many other artists have been silent. Their reasons hardly need comment here. The names of some have now reappeared on our billboards and in our concert halls. A few months have sufficed to bring Mme. Monique Haas, a pianist of exceptional quality, to the front rank she so richly deserves.

I have tried to draw you a quick little sketch of our musical life since 1940. There remains still to be told what has happened since our liberation, and what real hope now enables us to await the future without anxiety.