

THEATRE-MUSIC IN PARIS

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PARIS is in full flight from reality again. You can state the situation, which is chronic, in two ways. You can say that culture and all it stands for appears periodically to be dying in Paris, and always a little something keeps alive which shoots up and saves the day; or you can say that Paris seems often about to break through to a period of real openness and enlightenment, and then there comes a wave of the foulest, most provincial and catty kind of self-interestedness which blankets everything. The temper of 1900 Paris (haven of political refugees) was on the enlightenment side—the excited years after the war, too, childish and wasteful as they were. Examples of black Paris are 1914 (Jaurès and the War) and today. In all the luxury trades at the moment, prestidigitation or a flagrant and frank reactionarism is the typical resort. There are of course hordes of anonymous Frenchmen, who go to meetings at the Salle Bullier to hear André Malraux, who read surreptitiously at the Left bookshop on the rue Monsieur-le-Prince what they cannot afford to buy, who even upon occasion make demonstrations, in behalf of Thaelmann and Dmitroff. But in official circles the traditional guises of tolerance and liberalism (“French broadmindedness”) have been scrapped.

Those emigré musicians from Fascist Germany who were not so loudly welcomed last year are this year even less welcome. Florent Schmitt, at a performance of Kurt Weill’s *Ballade de César* (neither a good nor a bad song, and certainly nothing to worry Schmitt), arose and shouted: “We have enough bad musicians in France already, without having to import German-Jewish ones.” This was complacently reported (not hushed up) by *Comoedia*, in whose pages twenty-two years ago Pavlovski defended the new *Sacre du Printemps* against chauvinistic attacks. . . . The general temper is of course less ugly, less reveal-

ing than Schmitt's snide gesture; but fear and escape are just as apparent in the polite revivals of Offenbach and J. Strauss, in a gayer and wilder Bal de la Comédie Française, in the new Montmartre cabaret, *1900 chez Lajunie*. The theatre is falling over itself in its attempt to pander to those whom the lackey reporters call "Paris"—the pleasure-seekers; it is being grimly coy and old-fashioned, it is saying over and over again, "This is the best of all possible worlds; things are lovely, things are fine." And most of the new music, which is theatre-music, has followed suit, and become the bald purveyor of graceful and meaningless tripe.

First, Henri Sauguet's music to Molière's *Le Sicilien, ou L'Amour Peintre* (as these lines are read, Paris is probably hearing it for the first time; I saw the preview in Brussels). Michel St. Denis and his Compagnie de Quinze have put on this one-act piece with a good deal of snap and style. They have tried to create a twentieth century equivalent to the Molièrean spirit, and by means of slapstick, quick-change and constant speed-up, have fairly succeeded. Sauguet's music, however, simply followed, rather abjectly, patterns of old court-music. The compositions, very small, thin, Watteauian rather than Mozartian, left uneasy and indefinite impressions; any other music, if pretty and lacey, would have done. A neat song *à trois*, an *opéra-bouffe* ballet and finale were good enough italics to a racy stage-action. One might suggest that Sauguet occasionally pick less phoney masters than Gounod and Ambroise Thomas for models.

If Sauguet's music to Molière is thin, Georges Auric's to the Copeau production of *Rosalinde* (a renamed *As You Like It*) is practically ectoplasmic. It is a long time since I have had to strain my ears to hear so little music. And the production, again a good one, cried aloud for it; in fact offered cues, implied the type required, did everything but provide the music itself. There was an opening parade—ten bars; a first scene in the forest of Arden—perhaps twelve bars; a finale—repeated four bars. The piece started, stopped; there was another little edge of sound; then an endless dead pause; and the next music was entirely new material. The score, if one can call it a score, is a dumping-ground of little lifeless abandoned musical bits. Some are for

voice, some for viola d'amore (the *Viens ici*, sung to a light accompaniment, did establish itself as actual music), some for chamber-group, badly recorded. The discrepancy between tiny disc-music and flesh-and-blood music was no help.

It is curious that Auric turned in a consistently better job on the commercial film *Lac aux Dames* (Vicki Baum's novel). The score had more body; its gay music was really good, and its descriptive music (never very remarkable in Auric) got by, at least went on unnoticeably. Auric's best incidental music to date is still the *Sang d'un Poète* film. There his brittle breathless manner, his little samples of music not emotional but emotionally clever, matched nicely the estheto-pathologies of Cocteau's sequences. Even *Diable* (which Auric did ten years ago as a skit for Spinelly) had more verve than the recent work. It is to the point that he is recognized as the official theatre-composer in Paris today. (Ibert runs him a close second; he also produces material which serves, but barely.)



As to the movies, they have come in for considerable attention. Ten years ago it was the ballet; some generations before that the Opéra Comique; now it is the film. Diaghilev is dead; the Ballet Suédois is no more; Massine and Balanchine are in America or in the American market, and Lifar at the Opéra can put on only one or two new works a season. French music has always been dedicated to some aspect of the theatre ever since Lully; so movies are the logical answer. The film corporations have made it easy; they have been eager and anxious to have good composers set their films. The situation is so different from that in America as to warrant comment. The problem for the French producer is to make the best films possible, so as to compete with Hollywood, Elstree and Moscow; he needs the best music, so he has sought out the best composers available, and given each one carte blanche on an entire film. It is taken for granted by the French that their best composers are Auric, Milhaud, Honegger, Ravel, Poulenc, etc. That these men are "modern" doesn't seem to worry anyone. In America, aside from one company in the East, movie-music is the compilation

of a staff of arrangers and composers; when a single man is given a whole job, the conventional musician takes precedence over the "modern" one. . . . It is true that Ravel's *Bolero* has found its way here to the movies. I once thought they were its level. Now I see that it had better be scrapped for good and all. The movies pose a complicated and important music-problem, which wants apposite solution; the *Bolero* will never solve any problems, it will never be anything but a rank musical offense.

I suppose the most important item has been the music made by Honegger and Arthur Hoérée for Dmitri Kirsanoff's *Rapt*, taken from Ramuz' novel *La Séparation des Races*. The movie itself is pretty poor horror-melodrama, aping those post-war morbid and lust-sick *Wedekinder*, and not quite getting away with it. Rape, idiocy, murder and arson figure spectacularly. The music is very good movie-music. I am unable to know how Honegger and Hoérée divided the work, although the thunderstorm and the watery dawn sound to me like pure Honegger. I think that in movie-music he has found his medium. It even occurs to me that he has never written much else. He seems very happy and very much at home working out literal, naturalistic restatements; the solution of musical conundrums à la R. Strauss—how to make the orchestra do bubbling streams, the wind, a chase—tickle him. There is a good deal of theoretical *chichi* involved (see all the discussions of this film in the special issue of *La Revue Musicale*): it appears a fugue was used for the dog chasing the goat (fuga, pursuit), an oldstyle pastorale accompanied the exteriors, symphonic development was avoided, but the old classical forms were encouraged; and more of the same. What it comes down to is that the score to *Rapt* is a serviceable continuity, flexible and interesting throughout, not always successful, but certainly superior in quality to the Hollywood or Joinville product.

Honegger has also been showing around a short movie, *L'Idée*, with a new kind of animated cartoon—"peintures animées" is the name given. This one uses the ether-wave instrument of Martenot, and the less said about it the better. The sound is like radio-static, accompanying a visual series of fog-like images; at the performance one got the part-pleasant, part-appalled sense

of being transported back to the dear dead lab-days when anything called an "experiment" was worth it.

Jean Wiéner has written music to the film *Maria Chapdelaine* (Louis Hémon's book). It has more flow and body than Auric's, and more conventional development and less literal description than Honegger and Hoérée's. Curiously, it is inferior to both. Wiéner can never be counted on for content; he has bravura, elegance, some style, a little malice. But his film-score is worked almost upon Wagnerian principles. It is symphonic music; it acts as overlay rather than support; it suffers reluctantly the *pianissimi* required of it during dialog, and at the first possible occasion rushes into *crescendi* which engulf plot, characters and story. And it turns out that this method, time-honored in the pre-talkie days, and still largely in use, simply will not do. The big moments call too much attention to the music, so that when the music does subside the effect is of a wheezy and defective bellows; or worse, of a change in *distance*, as though the orchestra had gone mad in a body, and were crazily parading toward us and then away from us. . . . Musical punctuation plus some (a little) of Honegger's naturalism are likely to prove the best method. Given a competent composer, continuity can be maintained without going in for symphony-writing, which muffs the whole function; the correct intensity-level can be set, the degree of the music's importance, which can be changed subtly for special commentary and the like; at the same time finickiness can be avoided, so that there need be no separate music for each closeup or longshot.

Kurt Weill's *Marie Galante* music got very little hearing, since the piece itself was taken off the boards of the Théâtre de Paris within a week. The tunes *J'Attends un Navire* and *Les Filles de Bordeaux* may pick up and have a career of their own in the music-halls; Margo Lion is at the moment singing the old *Dreigroschenoper* ballads at the Noctambules, and she could do with a change of repertoire. Weill is at present at work upon his next "grosse wurf", a huge oratorio-spectacle, *The Road to Promise*, to a text by Franz Werfel, and scheduled for New York under Reinhardt's direction in the fall. A private piano-performance of this work indicates to me that it is Weill's best

score, and also his most uneven. Weill has one theatre-attack. It has long-range communicability, and sufficient variety inside its own curious limitations. The ghetto-ballads, the more severely-paced choral-numbers, the hurries and the sharp easy-rhythmed orchestral interludes, comprise his equipment; and he uses it all, and in the same way, for almost every work. You can sing it, it is all thrice familiar, it is *proved* theatre-music. The questionable intelligence involved in using the same general style for the Middle-Western *Mahogonny* and the Old Testament *Road to Promise* evidently does not bother him.



The revival of long-defunct operettas looks, on the face of it, like another aspect of the "renewal of the classics," which Paris has been seeing for several years. It started as a sort of protest by young régisseurs, wearied and disgusted at the wretchedly routine productions the Comédie Française grinds out. As a movement, the "renewal" was, is, all to the good. But a revival of an operetta is something else again. The operetta success must be timely; it has vogue for the reason that it is strictly up-to-date; it belongs to one year and no other. So that a revival of J. Strauss or Offenbach becomes a social symptom; the nostalgia for the old tunes and the old glamors is the key to the wish for salve and consolation, and the refuge from meaning and reality which a reinvoked past gaiety affords. . . . This year Offenbach's *La Créole* is on, with Josephine Baker creating the title role. In 1873 at the Bouffes-Parisiens, Anna Judic darkened her skin for the part; Baker on the other hand uses a lighter makeup than her natural chocolate. The continuance of favor which this chorus-girl out of *Shuffle Along* enjoys in Paris is one of the minor phenomena of the theatre-world. Her voice is little and pearly (Louis Laloy insists her high fifth, G to D-above-the-staff, has an "éclat et fraîcheur incomparables"), she can dance passably, and her body with its long lovely legs is something to look at. But she lacks fire completely, and she lacks ease; to remember what Florence Mills was in the way of poise and excitement is to think Baker back into the chorus again. Offen-

bach's music holds up in the adagios and the love-tunes (the farewell "sans rancune," for example) ; but not in the quick sections, where every effect recalls a horse-race—they're off! The wedding-dances in the second act were exceedingly hoydenish, nervous but not animated. The milieu of the piece is Louis-Philippe and Martinique, a windfall combination for the bourgeois scene-designer; and the stage appropriately emphasized elaborateness and coquetry, color and plush. Robert Quinault managed the Roxyish dance-numbers; he has become, with his Rex-movie "ballet français", the Busby Berkeley of the boulevards.

I am not one of those who enjoy the waltzes of J. Strauss. I recognize their value as document; they are to middle nineteenth-century Vienna what the *Histoire du Soldat* is to 1920 Paris; I suppose there is no more valuable photograph of the epoch in existence. But I detest the qualities—the winsome slightly beery sparkle, the sinking, swaying giddiness and frou-frou and glass-clinking and gallantry and code—and I am revolted by the musical mannerisms—the eternal accent-and-drag, the hesitation-glide on each second beat, the unspeakable transitions joining eighteen different kinds of music because they are all three-four. I am therefore possibly not the person to comment on the *Jolies Viennoises* theatre-piece which Louis Masson has fashioned out of Strauss' posthumous *Wiener Blut*. (Apparently a foreign composer is all right in France if he is dead as well.) I am told this is not the best Strauss; it sounds to me as good as any of them, indeed I don't think I could know how it differs from the others. On the stage there were the interminable networks of intrigues, flirtations, confusions and bland happy-endings; and in the orchestra there were—well, there were the waltzes.