

## CHARLES MARTIN LOEFFLER

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DURING the early years of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, there sat at the concert-master's stand beside Franz Kneisel a tall blond young man, still in his twenties, whose seriousness as he played was mitigated by occasional smiling "asides" to his companion. This was Charles Martin Loeffler, in whom Major Higginson had such confidence that no contract existed between them. With Kneisel, Timothee Adamowski, Otto Roth, Fritz Giese and Alwin Schroeder from the ranks of the orchestra, Loeffler was a frequent soloist at its concerts. He played works then constituting the advance guard of the period, now seldom heard, such as Bruch's *G-minor Concerto* and the *Scotch Fantasia*, Lalo's *Fantasia Norvégienne* and the *Symphonie Espagnole*, Godard's *Concert Romantique*, Saint-Saens' *First Concerto in A-major*. With Kneisel he played Bach's *Concerto in D-minor* for two violins, and Mozart's *Symphonic Concerto* for violin and viola. Loeffler at once established a position as a brilliant and magnetic soloist of irresistible distinction. Few suspected his potentiality as a composer.

It was on November 20, 1891, that music by Loeffler was first heard at a Boston Symphony concert when he appeared as soloist in a suite for violin and orchestra, *Les Veillées de l'Ukraine*, inspired by tales of Gogol. On January 4, 1895, Loeffler again performed in his own *Divertimento* for violin and orchestra, comprising a *Préambule*, *Eclogue* and *Carnival des Morts*. In the latter appear fantastic variations on the plain chant *Dies Irae*, probably the first instance of a predilection so prominent in mature years. So warmly was the new work received that it was repeated in the following year—an unusual procedure for those conservative days.

This was the epoch when the Kneisel Quartet, generously aided by Major Higginson, was establishing its unique position; when Mr. B. J. Lang, conductor of the Cecilia Society, and fertile organizer, who brought out a series of piano-concertos and various programs of little heard music, including the sensational concert-production of *Parsifal*, was a dominant figure in the musical life of Boston. Chadwick, Arthur Foote, Mrs. Beach and the youthful Edward MacDowell were already composers of note. The singers William J. Winch, Miss Lena Little and others were active at private musicales given by Mrs. Montgomery Sears and Mrs. John L. Gardner.

Loeffler was from the first a figure of distinction in the musical life of Boston. After his studies with Kiel in Berlin, he found a sympathetic environment in Paris where Ernest Guiraud, Debussy's master at the Paris Conservatoire, was his teacher. He was intimate with Fauré, who to the end of his life maintained friendly relations with Loeffler, and dedicated a violoncello sonata to him. Always an ardent and discriminating reader, Loeffler found French literature as sympathetic as its music. The poetry of Verlaine, Baudelaire, Rollinat and Gustave Kahn, the plays of Maeterlinck furnished a fitting background for musical works. This penetration into the spirit of literature of diverse periods and countries marked Loeffler apart from the generality of musicians. He was unique among composers in that he could drop music to talk of literature and painting with spontaneity and authority. He always had in mind some work of stylistic finesse and atmospheric charm to recommend whether it was Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*, Frazer's *Golden Bough* or Gérard d'Houville's exotic picture of life in Martinique, *Le Séducteur*.

Even before the *Divertimento*, another work by Loeffler, a *Fantastic Concerto* for violoncello and orchestra, had so impressed the audiences of the Boston Symphony Orchestra that it, too, was repeated. But on January 9, 1898 the first performance at these concerts of the symphonic poem *La Mort de Tintagiles* in its early version for two violas d'amour and orchestra established firmly Loeffler's position as a composer, and confirmed previous convictions as to his creative ability. Its technical mastery, the

personal nature of his individual style and its persuasive eloquence were patent to intelligent listeners. For reasons of greater practicality the composer later brought out a revised version of this work, curtailing somewhat the passages given to the solo instruments, replacing one *viole d'amour* by a solo violin and retouching the orchestration. In its new edition, *La Mort de Tintagiles* won Loeffler widespread recognition. This acclaim was continued by *La Villanelle du Diable* for orchestra, after verses by Rollinat, the poignant *Rhapsodies* for oboe, viola and piano, also inspired by Rollinat, and by the delicate *Poem*, first known by a title from Verlaine's *La Bonne Chanson* "Avant que tu ne t'en ailles." A shorter work *By the Waters of Babylon*, Psalm 137, for women's chorus, two flutes, violoncello, harp and piano, does not yield in charm and mastery of a subtle medium to the foregoing.

In the meantime chamber music had not relaxed its appeal despite Loeffler's command of the orchestral medium. After the early quartet a *Sextet* for strings (1893), an *Octet* for two violins, viola, violoncello, two clarinets, contrabass and harp (1897) and the *Quintet* for three violins, viola and violoncello (1902) show Loeffler's flair for unusual combinations of instruments, characteristic of his distaste for routine and his inventive sensibility. All these works were heard at concerts of the Kneisel Quartet. It is to be regretted that the composer's rigorous self-criticism prevented their being published. Loeffler achieves a climax of nobility, reticence and command over stylistic problems in chamber music in his *Music for Four Stringed Instruments*, in memory of Victor Chapman.

With the production of *A Pagan Poem*, enlarged for full orchestra from the original version for small orchestra, Loeffler reaches the pinnacle of his mastery. While sheer number of performances may not be taken as an invariable criterion, the frequent repetitions of this work not only by the Boston Symphony orchestra, but by symphonic organizations throughout the country, indicate the duration of recognition which its intrinsic qualities have commanded. Despite his attainment as a composer of songs and as a creator of subtle atmosphere in works of lesser scope, Loeffler here gives concrete evidence of dimensions of

greatness in highly authentic mood and dramatic eloquence. Always individual, in *A Pagan Poem* he has recorded a high pitch of personal fervor and expressed it in universality of sentiment.

Notwithstanding Loeffler's power as a composer of orchestral works, not even his high reputation in this field can obscure his position as a composer of songs. In this respect he was aided by his impeccable taste in literature. Whether the poet whose verses suggested a lyric setting were Verlaine, Baudelaire, Rossetti, Poe, Cabot Lodge or Yeats, Loeffler always found the precise equivalent in them, while the diversity of the harmonic background verges upon the miraculous in delicate appropriateness. Perhaps the height of his lyric genius is to be found in the *Irish Fantasies* for voice and orchestra. No one who ever heard John McCormack sing these songs with the Boston Symphony Orchestra could forget such supreme manifestations of inspiration.

A dominant feature in Loeffler's maturity was his increasing preoccupation with plain chant as a source of melodic material and means of atmosphere. It is impossible to trace systematically its growth in his musical individuality. But the supreme instance is to be found in a symphony in one movement, *Hora Mystica*, which had its source in Loeffler's visit to the Benedictine monks at Maria Laach. Performed first at Litchfield, Connecticut and later by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1916, it proved to be one of Loeffler's loftiest works in its sublimely ecclesiastic mood and spirit of devotion. Loeffler was, however, his own keenest critic. Like Chopin and Brahms his passion for revision was extreme. To the writer he once remarked "a composer should copy his score at least three times." Without documentary evidence it is impossible to call in question a composer's judgment, or to quarrel with the severity of his artistic conscience. But the fact that *Hora Mystica* was never repeated or published cannot but cause regret.

In the *Hymn to the Sun*, with text by St. Francis of Assisi, for voice and small orchestra, Loeffler not only satisfied his high standards, but produced a masterpiece of lesser dimensions, but still a masterpiece. Here again a background of plain chant united to a mood of ardent devotion makes for a rare and convincing spirituality.

Loeffler's position in this country was in some respects anomalous. A citizen of many years' standing, moved by admiration and affection for the land of his adoption, it was nevertheless impossible for him to dismiss the environment of his formative years. Despite many and obvious ties, he was to a certain extent an exile. The Paris of Verlaine, Monet, Fauré, Debussy and to some degree d'Indy remained his native heath. The totality of his cultivation in literature, the drama, painting and music, his instinctive response to the Latin art of life remained a spontaneous background. His friendships with men and women of diversified types in and about Boston testify to his intellectual versatility and to his human breadth. But the real sources of his esthetic and spiritual perception were nourished from afar. Like his friends in Paris, he was receptive to the other arts to an extent foreign to the Anglo-Saxon musician. One of his oldest friends was John Sargent, who was a discriminating music-lover, and a remarkable sight-reader, thus enhancing their mutual sympathy. That Loeffler could maintain his clear flame of individuality in a Puritan land, emphasizes the inherent tenacity of his spirit.

Despite its complexity and rarefied individuality, Loeffler's musical idiom is not difficult to analyze. From his early Parisian years one can trace records of the appreciation of Bizet, Lalo and even Chabrier. The stylistic precision of Lalo, the piquancy of Bizet and the boldness of Chabrier were all productive of reaction. More obvious was the harmonic and melodic subtlety of Fauré, in which modal suggestions are so frequent. Still clearer is Loeffler's obligation to Debussy, an indebtedness to method rather than to matter. The pre-occupation with plain chant, which is the common heritage of the French composer, enters into Loeffler's style in increasing proportion with advancing maturity. From these sources, aided by his literary proclivities, Loeffler found subjects in harmony with his tastes. The predilection for the macabre, which is in evidence in the *Villanelle du Diable*, the *Rhapsodies* and some of the songs, was episodic if sincere. As he developed Loeffler turned more and more towards universality of mood colored by his individual perception.

Despite the fact that analytically Loeffler must be regarded as an off-shoot of the "French School", no just critic can fail to



recognize that he attained his own style and delivered his personal message. He is like a colonist who never lost touch with the mother-country; in an alien environment he reached an intensity of expression which might never have become his in Paris. Remaining in Paris, he might have been recognized as a classic among his contemporaries. Here, he became a classic whose qualities were intensified by isolation.

Like others of his generation, Loeffler was distressed by the seemingly aimless confusion among musical trends of today. With little sympathy for experiments in the polytonal or atonal field, it seemed to him that his musical gods were being discredited, and that even his own approach to musical art were being questioned. Yet where his interest was engaged, Loeffler was quick to perceive new sources of material. That he was a discriminating admirer of jazz was not inconsistent with his searching ideals. His admiration for the music of George Gershwin was spontaneous and frank. No one who has heard his piece in jazz style for Leo Reismann's band entitled *Glowns* could fail to salute a miracle of assimilation which did not conceal the authentic traits of Loeffler's individuality. In the unpublished *Partita* for violin and piano are equally striking instances of the fertilization of jazz in the higher interests of expression. The excesses of some experimenters not only left him cold, but their lack of esthetic perspective actually disgusted him.

The composer of the *Rhapsodies*, of the *Irish Fantasies* and many other songs, of the *Hymn to the Sun*, of the *Poem, La Bonne Chanson* and *Memories of My Childhood* and above all of the *Pagan Poem*, has done more than produce works of impeccable craftsmanship and creative originality that are without equal among American composers. He has contributed significantly to the musical literature of the world.

Already Loeffler has taken on the aspect of a legend. As a highly scrupulous if exacting teacher, as a virtuoso in whom subtlety of detail never obscured vigor of interpretation, as an erudite and witty companion with a rich background of experience and anecdote, as a man of acute and varied tastes, and, in his music, as a master of finesse and almost eerie delicacy, equally at home in moods of robust vigor, Loeffler remains an unparalleled figure in our recent musical life.