

MODERN MUSIC IN MODERN ITALY

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TRAVELING about the world, one hears almost everywhere, with monotonous insistence, that contemporary music is little or not at all appreciated in Italy. A number of works which have achieved important successes elsewhere have indeed proved to be fiascos in our country. Around these has grown a sort of legend which, after a few years, has become a facile common-place. Since every error contains at least a bit of truth, in this case it is interesting to determine the degree of veracity as well as to seek the reasons why the Italian musical world accords little favor to certain kinds of music.

Without wishing to be a reactionary in the evil sense of that word, I cannot help recalling, in connection with much modern music, the *bon-mot* of Rossini. Asked by a young composer to give his opinion of music the young man had submitted to him, he answered: "My friend, I find herein both beauty and novelty. Unfortunately the beauty is not novel and the novelty not beautiful."

It is necessary at the outset to state an essential point; Italy is a country situated on the edge of Europe, and, in the first place, its geographic position and, in the second, its historic and civilizing function, have endowed it with a role that differs from, and is independent of the other European countries. This complete independence of the national spirit has provided an essential basis for the greatness and absolute originality of its art, in whatever field. It is proper that Italy should be jealous of that independence today, as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow, and that it should cherish above everything the preservation of that liberty.

This independent attitude has saved our country from the excesses of Wagnerian chromaticism, from the corruption and

harmonic decadence which characterized the fifty years of music preceding the war. It is enough to compare the pure classic diatonalism of *Falstaff* with other music typical of that epoch. When one realizes how small was the influence of German chromaticism in our country, it should be perfectly obvious why atonality has never entered into the technic of our music. (In Italy it is regarded as a great mistake, though a universal one, to contrast tonality and atonality, since atonality is obviously the extreme consequence of the Germanic chromaticism of the last century, and therefore marks the end of an historic cycle, rather than the beginning of a new conception of music.)

Italy has, as everyone knows, a vast and deep musical tradition. A tradition of such strength and integrity imposes great duties at the same time that it traces and delimits the road which leads to the future. In a country like ours it is therefore natural that the contemporary problems of music should be approached constantly from two aspects, the national and the universal.


The past twenty years in Italy have been marked by bitter battles over the new music, both foreign and Italian. They raged first about the names of Debussy, then of Stravinsky, and later of Hindemith and others, resulting at last in a victory for these musicians and their music no less complete than was gained in other countries which have seen—let it never be forgotten—the same struggle over the same names and the same works. In the festival at Venice and that of the I. S. C. M. at Florence, we have the most recent and interesting indications of the attitude of the Italian public toward contemporary music. The triumphs of Markevitch, Bartok, and Alban Berg are particularly significant. Concerning this last composer (for whom I have a great admiration) the welcome accorded last winter at the Augusteo in Rome to excerpts from *Wozzeck* proves that, no matter how strongly opposed to atonality is the Italian sensibility, the public is nevertheless ready to grant its approval, even enthusiasm whenever it is in the presence of a veritable work of art.

Italian musical history of the past ten years, (except in relation to the theatre, which is in a special situation) shows the greatest composers and the most important musical works of the period as recipients of the esteem and success they deserve. But there

still remains the question why certain music which has gained wide currency and apparent success elsewhere, has not been accepted in our country.

It should be pointed out that Italy has no place for the type of mental attitude known as snobbism. In Italy musical opinions are always based on the sensitivity of the public. The fame and foreign importance of a name have little or no effect on that public, which always remains jealously independent—anti-European, as we said at the opening of this essay. Today, when so many works which seemed audacious and revolutionary and destined to change the face of music are already falling into desuetude and inexorably disappearing from programs, the Italian public may congratulate itself on not having wasted time pretending to love them. They were, for the most part, the works of musicians who, with the tranquil diligence of zealous clerks, for twenty years insisted upon keeping *avant-garde* positions.

We are at the present moment witnessing a universal return to artistic normality, a return which has less importance in Italy than elsewhere, our music never having been abnormal. Everywhere in Europe there are musicians who are still playing little subversive esthetic games of dubious taste. But they are on the periphery of history, doomed to lose their path completely in an epoch like this, which demands imperiously sane and beautiful works in place of sterile and anemic academic exercises. We still see many foreign musicians reacting against romanticism, while for some years we have been at peace with the preceding century, for us no longer a danger. Our successful reaction after the war against the decadence of realism, and the distinctly constructive movement which has characterized and still characterizes that period for us, have restored that precious quality of which romanticism robbed us: the unconsciousness of expression. By which I mean that expression has again become one element among others in a work of art, and is no longer the unique and generally autobiographic purpose of artistic creation.



Even though these observations are, of necessity, somewhat premature and summary, a conclusion may now be drawn from

them. Italy has preserved intact the cult of pure beauty, of that beauty which is the only reality humanity possesses, and which it is impelled to shield from every injury, every falsification, every attempt at confusion with ugliness. We still have one other weakness: that of believing in the necessity of an art that is lasting, of artistic perfection which will withstand time and never be satisfied with modestly gratifying the ephemeral and necessarily provisional tastes of one style.

As the facts of the last few years abundantly prove, Italy is ready to welcome any form of music whatever, even that farthest removed from her temperament and tradition. All that is necessary is for the music to belong to an elevated order, that is to say, to that sort of art which rises above a simple personal or national problem, to attain the universal. It is in this way—in a relatively short time—that Italy has learned passionately to love the music of Richard Wagner, an art farthest from her sensibility and tastes.

We are living in a period of selection, a period which has for its task the liquidation of the enormous quantity of mistakes left by the decline of romanticism and the years immediately after the war. It is understandable that in so intense a labor the art which survives should be extremely restricted in quantity. But it is certain that, from now on, in refusing to admire short-lived music and, on the contrary, in according its loyalty only to the most significant and uniquely beautiful works of our epoch, our country has simply demonstrated once more that the Italian people keep intact their ancient reverence for perfect art, and at the same time give proof of their good sense and elementary prudence. This attitude is in perfect conformity with the spirit of the race and its history.