

## FIVE POST-ROMANTICS\*

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PRESENT-DAY music cannot be completely accounted for without some consideration of the five important post-romantics whose influence was felt in the musically creative world of 1910. These men wrote in the tradition of Chopin or Wagner or Schubert or Tchaikowsky; yet younger men could borrow something technically important from their work. The late-romantics faced two ways: esthetically toward a tradition that had already fulfilled its promise; technically however, their music, in its harmony, contrapuntal texture, orchestral timbre, melodic line, had elements that could be disengaged and utilized for new ends. Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Alexander Scriabine, Gabriel Fauré, Jan Sibelius, have little in common except their romantic bias and a certain forward-moving quality, different in the music of each. Yet each had something to contribute, though his subsequent influence was purely technical.

Of the five men, Mahler gave most to the music of the future although, paradoxically, he was the most frankly romantic. His greatest work, *Das Lied von der Erde*, is in many respects the swan song of the entire movement. There is something symbolic in his reluctance to touch the final chord both here and in his *Ninth Symphony*. The composer appears to sense, deep within himself, that he is saying a final farewell to the nineteenth century. All his music re-invokes the glories of that golden age, with a note of regret for a wonderful epoch gone without hope of recall.

It is impossible to understand Mahler except as a profoundly child-like artist who was, nevertheless, heir to all the problematical complexities of the modern world. The special poetry of his music comes from this naiveté, a quality shared with Berlioz. Of course it is a mistake to compare either man to Beethoven. The difference between listening to Beethoven and listening to Mahler is the difference between watching a great man walk down the street, and watching a great actor in the part of a great man walking down the street. Both experiences can be moving,

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though in distinct ways. Those who don't like Mahler simply do not enjoy play-acting; they should have the wit to recognize this fact.

Mahler's faults have been thoroughly exploited. He is admittedly long-winded, trite, bombastic; he lacks taste, he unblushingly plagiarizes, filching his material from Schubert, Mozart, Bruckner, or any other of a half dozen favorites. His music is full of human frailty. But when all is said, there remains something extraordinarily touching about it, which compensates for the weaknesses. This may be because his music is so very Mahler-like in every detail. All the nine symphonies abound in personality – he had his own way of saying and of doing everything. The irascible scherzi, the heaven-storming calls in the brass, the special quality of his communings with nature, the gentle melancholy of a transition passage, the gargantuan Ländler, the pages of incredible loneliness – these together with an inevitable histrionics, an inner warmth and the will to evoke the largest forms and grandest musical thoughts, build up one of the most fascinating composer-personalities of modern times.

But Mahler would be an important figure even if his music were not so engrossing. Two facets of his musicianship were years in advance of their time – one, the curiously contrapuntal fabric of the musical texture; the other, more obvious, his strikingly original instrumentation. Viewed properly, these two elements are really connected. It was because his music was so contrapuntally conceived, without the typical nineteenth century underpinning of the melodies by blocked-out harmonies such as we find continuously in Rimsky-Korsakoff or Franck, because he worked primarily with a maze of separate strands independent of all such chordal underpinning, that his instrumentation has the sharply etched and clarified sonority which is to be heard again and again in the music of later composers. Mahler's was the first orchestra to play *without pedal*, to borrow a phrase from piano technic. The use of the orchestra as a many-voiced body in this particular way was typical of the age of Bach and Handel. So far as orchestral practice is concerned, Mahler bridges the gap between the early eighteenth century and the neo-classicists of our own time.

The timbre of Mahler's orchestra is, of course, entirely his own. His scores are full of *trouvailles*. The many years he spent conducting leading ensembles gave him complete assurance with unusual combinations of instruments, sudden unexpected juxtapositions of sonorities, or thinly scored passages of instruments playing far apart in their less likely registers – all such effects as are to be found again in the orchestral works of Schön-

berg or Honegger or even of very recent composers like Shostakovitch or Benjamin Britten.

Speaking generally, Mahler appears to be a late romantic who made use of an eighteenth century technic. However one may regard him as a composer, it is impossible to deny his influence, direct or indirect, on the present day.

### III

Strauss, by comparison, cuts a purely nineteenth century figure. I should like to lean over backwards to be fair in evaluating the work of the man who held the center of the European musical stage from 1890-1900. In recent years the critical estimate of Strauss has sunk so low, it is difficult to remember that the tone poems on which his reputation rests were once astonishingly "modernistic." A whole generation has since argued the merits and shortcomings of this music. It was once generally conceded that Strauss' orchestral powers were superb. Without belittling his obvious brilliance we can today no longer share the enthusiasm it first aroused, our taste in instrumentation has undergone so much change. The general sound of Strauss' orchestra now appears over-rich; his scores, uneconomical, weighted with notes, super-Wagnerian. They have little relationship to the more sober and precise orchestration of the present day.

Strauss' career runs parallel with the course of the decadent romantic movement. He did his best work after reaching maturity, when he was closest in time to Wagner. *Don Juan*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Death and Transfiguration* are still human and commensurable. *Quixote*, the *Domestic* and *Alpine Symphonies* are certainly more astonishing in many ways, but they invariably give one a bloated feeling, as from something indigestible and monstrous. There is little fun in these scores; they leave one limp and unconvinced.

But there are, at moments, in all his work, extraordinary premonitions of the music to come. I am thinking of the so-called "critic's" section in *A Hero's Life*, which snarls and rasps with all the modernism of a score composed thirty years later. Or of certain harmonies in *Salomé* and *Elektra*, uncompromising in their harshness. And also of a few climactic pages in *Till Eulenspiegel* far in advance of the day in which they were conceived. Later composers have used these hints for their own purposes.

The essential fact remains however, that these products are the offspring of an exhausted parentage. Not all Strauss' genius can bring them to life so that they speak to us of anything but a world of feeling that is

past. The true nature of these tone-poems was long obscured by controversies over the relative merits of program versus absolute music. But now it is clear to all that they represent the final manifestation of a dying world – the romantic Wagnerian world of the end of the century.

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The case of Scriabine is, in certain ways, a tragic one. The music of this extremely gifted man came into being principally by way of Chopin and Liszt. It is indisputably romantic. But in his later years Scriabine moved on to mysticism under the influence of theosophical ideas. It is curious that no composer before him should have tried to make a serious connection between music and the occult sciences. More than any other art, music puts us in touch with the Unknowable, it has always been associated with religious ritual. In a sense, Scriabine's theosophical mysticism is a direct descendant of the Christian mysticism of Wagner's *Par-sifal*. Before he died in 1915, Scriabine was planning a so-called *Mystery*, which was to out-Wagner Wagner in its amalgamation of all the arts.

It is hard to ascribe benefits to Scriabine's art – purely as music – from its contact with theosophy. The composer is at his best in germinal ideas, which are often magical in their effect, the best examples I know of "pure" inspiration. But Scriabine never succeeded in finding a suitable form for his remarkable themes. He never freed himself from the conservatory lessons of his Moscow days. The ten piano sonatas present the incredible spectacle of musical ideas of genius, straitjacketed into the old classical sonata form. The growing recognition of this tragic inconsistency tends to make performances of even his best works – *Prometheus* or the *Poem of Ecstasy* – more and more infrequent.

Harmonically, Scriabine's music exerted important influence, particularly when it was first being circulated. There was much talk then of new scales and their resultant chords. Scriabine's harmonies based on intervals of fourths instead of thirds, were more daring, more sophisticated and subtle than those of most of his contemporaries. But here again he adhered closely to a narrow set of self-imposed formulae and inevitably the pleasurable sensations first associated with his harmonic freedom began to wear off as the underlying system became more and more manifest. Even before his death, other composers experimented with a harmony less constricted and more venturesome. By the middle 'twenties his influence was confined, for the most part, to a small number of admirers inside and outside the Soviet Union. Today there seems to be little future for Scriabine's

music except, perhaps, for the best of his piano pieces.

### III

It may be surprising to some to find the name of Gabriel Fauré in a list of late romantics who have influenced present-day music. It is true that Fauré's influence is confined almost exclusively to France. Nevertheless, as head of the Paris Conservatoire for fifteen years, and as the teacher of Ravel, Schmitt, Roger-Ducasse, Nadia Boulanger and many other leading figures in French musical life, his artistic principles have gained broad circulation. Fauré did not really find himself as a composer until he had passed the half-century mark – from about 1898 to 1923. His best work was therefore written at a time when impressionism held the center of the stage in France. Interest in his work was quite overshadowed by the more spectacular achievements of Debussy. Yet he steered a course all his own, completely free of that influence, an independence which can only be explained by the strongly personal character of his musical nature.

His example inspired a generation which quickly tired of impressionism. Composers were inclined to overlook the fact that Fauré had his roots in romanticism because his was the pre-Wagnerian brand of romanticism, without the Bayreuth grandeurs – almost a neo-romanticism, delicate, reserved and aristocratic. And no matter what its derivation, it possessed all the earmarks of French temperament: harmonic sensitivity, impeccable taste, classic restraint, and a love of clear line and sound proportion. These qualities show even in the earlier works, those fashioned too closely after the model of Schumann and Saint-Saëns. What remained uppermost with Fauré's postwar listeners were directness and simplicity, innate modesty and charm.

His natural medium was the small form: he composed hundreds of songs and much chamber music. What Fauré most lacked to make him a composer of the very first rank was a certain broadness of scope. He worked within a fairly limited emotional frame, depending largely on formulae and sequences of his own contriving. Like Scriabine, but within more normal limits, he was boldest in his use of harmony, discovering subtle modulations and unsuspected relationships between the most ordinary chords. His harmonic invention lasted until he was well past seventy. In songs such as *Diane*, *Séléné*, from *L'Horizons chimériques*, or the *Danseuse* from *Mirages*; in the last piano *Nocturnes*, and perhaps, most of all, in the *Piano Trio* and the *Second Piano Quintet*, we have a parallel to the



surviving energies of Verdi composing *Otello* and *Falstaff* – both septuagenarians working at the zenith of their creative powers.

## III

A great deal of nonsense has been written about the music of Sibelius. It would have been a comparatively simple matter to evaluate his work had the picture not been obscured by the exaggerated commentary of a handful of English and American critics. The simple truth is that Sibelius is a late-romantic composer, with his own personal way of saying things. How important are these things? My answer is they are sympathetic but not very significant. Sibelius does not live in the twentieth century. He is a hangover from the eighteen-nineties, and while his ruminations on life and on man are fairly interesting and are expressed in a purely personal way, they are conclusions arrived at from premises which do not hold water in our own time.

Why was the name of Sibelius ever coupled with that of Beethoven? It would have been nearer the mark to choose Smetana or Dvorak. To put Sibelius in Beethoven's niche is to remove emphasis from his truer qualities. By nature he is a folk composer. Like all folk composers, he writes his music from a special landscape and from a provincial imagination. He falls back constantly on a pastoral mood of folk inspiration, he repeats himself in themes and technical formulae, he puts us always into the same emotional atmosphere. These are not the characteristics of the first-rate composer. Within his own limits he is attractive enough. But there is a difference between being sympathetic and attractive, and being the successor to Beethoven.

Much has been written of the originality of form in the seven symphonies composed from 1899 to 1925. According to Cecil Gray, Sibelius is the only composer who has contributed anything significant to the form of the symphony since Beethoven's day. A close examination of the scores fails to bear out these statements. It is to Sibelius' credit that after having written a *First Symphony* in conventional style, he should have seen the need for freer treatment of the symphonic form. As Eric Blom says: "His characteristic method of working with short motives in a kind of mosaic style rather than with elaborate themes which take their recognized places as first, second and auxiliary subjects, would not readily fall into the orthodox formula." At its best the music seems to flower, often from unpromising beginnings. As I have already said, he has his own way of

doing things. This is not quite identical with revolutionizing the entire structure of the symphony. *Number Four* and *Number Seven* are generally the most admired of his works and they are undoubtedly among his best. They do not however stand up as masterpieces. The *Fourth*, which was considered a marvel of cryptic originality in 1912, is the unmistakable work of the Finnish composer in mood and thematic materials. But the formal structure in several of the movements still seems cryptic in 1941. Similarly, the *Seventh*, one of the rare species of one-movement symphonies, does not satisfy structurally. It is rather a symphonic poem than a symphony. Sibelius is at his best in such moments as the contemplative pastoral mood that opens the *Fifth* or in the peasant-like, scurrying passages that begin its last movement. He is least impressive when indulging in gloomy, nineteenth century pseudo-philosophical broodings.