

perfectly. The request of the state was an opportunity to carry out this project. M. Rouché then called upon Charles Dullin, director of the Théâtre de l'Atelier for the stage direction and André Masson for the décor.

The war broke out but the Opéra did not give up the project, and all during the "calm" period of this frightfulness, the Opéra continued its work. Dullin made a striking *mise-en-scène*. He divided the ancient chorus into two parts: a singing group immobile as a wall surface and a dancing chorus choreographically expressive of the emotions of the drama. To express all phases of the magic sorcery of Medea, which was clearly indicated in the malign throne conceived by the artist Masson, she was attended by three mysterious, crawling figures, suggesting her crimes; these disappeared in the purely dramatic parts of the work.

Rehearsals were begun but illness prevented my following them. I arrived in Paris just in time for the *répétition générale* to find that everything had been prepared with perfect care. Marisa Ferrer made a sensational characterization of Medea, and Jeannine Michaud personified innocence itself in the difficult vocalizing of the role of Creusa. In short, from every point of view, this was a performance of rare perfection. Despite the dull sound of the anti-aircraft guns that one heard throughout the spectacle, I did not then remotely imagine that this was to be the last work staged by the Opéra before military disaster overtook my unhappy country.

The premiere was given on May 8th. Had it not been for the many military uniforms, it might have seemed a pre-war performance, so great were the crowds, so brilliant, so elegant the audience. On May 10th, Belgium and Holland were invaded. Then the Battle of France began. *Medée* was performed again on the fifteenth and then on the twenty-fifth. This last performance before an almost empty house was broadcast by the state radio and I heard it at my home in the country in Aix-en-Provence.

So it was that I had the good fortune to see my latest theatre work produced – and with what perfection! – during the high-tide of war. How moving it is for me to think that the last performance of the Opéra of Paris was granted to me – like a magnificent gift from my country before the curtain rose on the drama which destroyed it.

*Darius Milhaud*

## DRUMS ALONG THE PACIFIC

**D**URING the last two years an extraordinary interest in percussion music has developed on the Pacific coast. In Seattle, San Francisco,

Oakland and Los Angeles, orchestras have been formed to play music for percussion instruments alone. They are directed chiefly by two young Western composers, John Cage and Lou Harrison, who have concocted innumerable creations for these instruments, and have induced others like Ray Green of San Francisco, Gerald Strang of Long Beach, and J. M. Beyer, formerly of New York, to write for them. In Cuba they found leading composers who had not only a vivid liking, but works already made for percussion — José Ardevol, Alejandro Caturla and Amadeo Roldan. Music by all these men has been rehearsed regularly in the various percussion orchestral groups, who thus acquire an ability to render intricate rhythms far beyond the capacity of professional symphony men, and to control countless gradations of tone-quality, many hitherto unsuspected. In 1939 the groups gave small demonstrations through the West, chiefly in the colleges. This year Seattle came down and joined San Francisco; and in July Cage and Harrison combined with William Russell, a seasoned percussion performer apt to turn up anywhere from New York to China, to give a large concert at Mills College, Oakland. Seventeen "percussors" made up the orchestra. They used the following instruments: *drums* — one snare, two bass, five black Chinese tomtoms, five small painted Chinese tomtoms, one pair of bongos; *wood*: eight Chinese wood-blocks, six dragon's mouths (temple blocks), four pair of claves; *metal*: one mariembula, two pair of finger cymbals, one pair of crash cymbals, one Turkish cymbal, four Chinese cymbals, one pair of jazz cymbals, five gongs, one tamtam, one Chinese painted gong, three Japanese temple gongs, five Japanese cup gongs, thirteen oxen bells, one set of orchestra bells, twelve cow bells, one dinner bell, one trolling bell, one turkey bell, one small Chinese bell, three loose sleigh bells, four triangles, three brake drums, eight strap irons, one pipe, three discs, ten thunder sheets, one wash tub, one washboard set; *rattles*: one quijada (jawbone), four pair maracas, one Indo-Chinese rattle, one North-Western Indian rattle, one sistrum, one tambourine, one wind bell; *miscellaneous*: one tortoise shell, one guiro, four rice bowls, three Mexican clay bowls, four slide whistles, one conch shell, one lion's roar, one string drum, one slap-stick, one piano, one xylophone, and about eighty beaters of all sorts.

It is irrelevant, for the moment, to evaluate the compositions performed as good or bad, important or unimportant. Let it be sufficient to note that all were serious attempts showing considerable variety, and that musical form was present and recognizable.

Now percussion alone as music is of course no new idea. The pre-war Italian futurists gave the world what were then considered earsplitting demonstrations. They also issued manifestos on how important it all was. Few of us today have heard any of the results of that effort; it seems to have consisted more of talk than action. From report the music was vague in form, unbalanced in sonority. Only one composer can be said to have carried these experiments forward. Edgar Varese combined in his music an over-weight of percussion instruments with a few other orchestral ones, the latter used explosively rather than melodically. By gradual reduction of the non-percussive elements he came finally to *Ionization*, a work composed nearly ten years ago for forty-one percussion instruments and sirens. It was received with less disfavor by the public than any previous exclusively percussion music and it made a genuine impression among musicians. Earlier percussion efforts had met grim resistance and adverse criticism. Today, Percy Grainger's *In a Nutshell* suite is generally well-liked, its unusual percussion section in the orchestra calls for no special comment. But on December 19, 1916, the critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, wrote: "Much of the Pastoral in Grainger's *In a Nutshell* suite filled this hearer with a wild longing to flee the place. I could not relate the din to anything within the realm of the art of music. The discordant shriekings were punctuated by rhythmical whacks on many kinds of drums and other instruments beaten with a stick, and a wail, a caterwaul, a helpless moaning howl was the way it sounded to these ears. It was as though anarchy were clamoring for musical expression or hideous madness shrieking for a transcription of its frenzies."

Percussion music is not all alike, nor is it all related to one school of music. The approach of the Italian futurists was in essence artificial, the basic idea being to create, ready-made and without gradual development, or experience with the instruments, a highly complex and sophisticated art-form. Varese's music was the culmination of this tendency. Grainger used percussion as an incident, to enhance and punctuate his orchestration. The Cuban composers create from direct experience; they are in close contact with the native Afro-Cuban music which is largely based on enticing primitive percussion rhythms. Our newest Pacific coast group — Cage, Green, Harrison and Strang — have also developed their interest naturally, as composers for the modern concert dance. In that field percussion instruments are essential as aids in defining rhythmic change. All dance is of course dependent on a well-defined beat; when the beat shifts constantly,

as in much of modern dancing, it is vitalizing to have the changes sharply indicated on percussion instruments. Composers who work with dancers come to know percussion instruments and their possibilities; daily association with the problem of rhythm forms their background. Having mastered the gamut of the instruments used in the studios, they very naturally proceed to compose for them works in larger forms, with enough tone-qualities and rhythms to achieve independent musical compositions.

Potentially rhythm and tone-quality are as important as melody and harmony, but the former are underdeveloped in our music. The full possibilities of percussion, whose accepted role is to provide unimportant splashes of color, have hardly been tapped in our symphonic literature. The work of a young, talented and well-trained group experimenting with rhythm and percussive tone qualities, may lead to their development as genuine structural materials to create differentiated outlines and combinations. It is encouraging too that the interest of these men is not the result of an abstract theory, but has grown quite naturally out of their own working musical environment. Some of their efforts already prove exciting to audiences, some seem boring. The question is raised why the group should deliberately exclude melodic instruments. To which the answer is simply that these have never been present. As a matter of judgment why is it more reprehensible to write for four percussion instruments than for two violins, viola and 'cello? The string quartet may at times be quite boring as a combination of instruments. Percussion alone may prove monotonous, but it is less apt to, because it is still in a state of experiment. New tones and rhythms are constantly being discovered. When the young experimenters have succeeded in fully exploring the field, there will still remain the untried possibilities of combining these results with the better-known resources of the full orchestra.

*Henry Cowell*

## NEW WORKS AT YADDO

IT may be that bombers over Europe and the sense of very few good days remaining ahead account for the packed houses at all four concerts of Yaddo's annual music period last September. The performances were, in any case, well nigh perfect, especially that by the Galimir Quartet. Statistically there were thirty-eight works by thirty-six composers — all Americans but one, with an age span from the early twenties to the late sixties. Tendency inclinations, with rare exceptions, were bluntly divided