

LIEGE, 1930

FREDERICK JACOBI

OF the eighth festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music, which took place in Liège, one might wish that the impressions were more specifically defined and that the tendencies of individual composers or of groups (geographical or otherwise) stood out more clearly. The works selected by the jury were four French, three Czecho-Slovakian, three English, three Belgian, two Austrian, two German, two Italian and one each from Switzerland, the United States, Rumania, Poland and Russia. Were they truly the best which these countries have to offer at present? That may be questioned. America could and should have been more fully represented. France was represented by works of Florent Schmitt and Albert Roussel, both masters whose styles are known and appreciated, by a piece by Jean Rivier, which can scarcely be typical of France's younger generation of today, and by a group of songs by Germaine Tailleferre, so slight that they appeared quite out of place. At a festival of this kind it would be desirable to hear the works of a Varese or a Villa Lobos, whose standings are still open to definition; or those of the young Russians, Dukelski and Lopatnikoff, fresh talents still offering the possibility of an adventure of some sort. Simplicity, a new simplicity, has been heralded as the order of the day. But there was little of this to be found in the music presented. One cannot but feel that the sectional juries and, finally, the international jury, might have made their selection with considerably greater care and imagination.

The programs nevertheless contained elements of interest and individual works of beauty. It is true that some of the best compositions were on programs which had not passed through the hands of the jury, programs which, so to speak, were on the

side-lines of the festival proper. But of these, more later. For the moment let us review the officially-chosen works in chronological order.

The *Septuor* (violin, clarinet, viola, horn, cello, bassoon and piano) by the Bohemian, Karel Haba, was the first of a series of Middle-European pieces showing the direct influences of Schönberg and of Hindemith. It was not without animation. Michel Erhard, also a Bohemian, played a piano piece of his own, which he calls by the not very specific title of *Musique*. He gave a delightful performance and must indeed have musical talent. But his work is without character and he has still to emerge from the masters whose compositions he has so obviously studied, Ravel among others. The songs by Mlle. Tailleferre (*Trois Chansons Françaises*) have already been mentioned. It must be added, in justice, that however trivial their content, they are done with skill and a certain charm. Her methods of avoiding an ultimate banality are adroit but by no means imperceptible.

The sonata for two pianos by Arnold Bax, admirably played by Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson, left one with the mixed feelings experienced before in the presence of this composer. Bax has the hand of a master, but does he not hold his reins a bit too tight? Like Scriabin, he builds his large and rather pretentious structures of sets of blocks, all more or less square, piling them up or laying them along, end to end, methodically and regularly. His music has more continuity than real flow. It seems to lack space—space for the improvisational, the *imprévu*. The composer's problem, in general, is to let his imagination soar whither it will and yet to hold it by a sort of invisible string, like the small boy with the kite. This structural suppleness, a suppleness which seems to defy analysis, is found at its best in the Bach of the *Preludes to the Well Tempered Clavichord*, in the Debussy of *La Mer*. One misses it most in composers like Scriabin and Bax. In addition, there is a quality to Bax's romanticism which is unappealing to many of us today; one regrets not being more moved by a phrase which is so obviously intended to be expressive.

Albert Huybrechts is a young Belgian who leaped into surprising fame some years ago when he captured, within a period

of a few weeks, two of Mrs. Coolidge's prizes—for a string quartet, performed at a festival in the Ojai valley, and a sonata for violin and piano, performed at the Washington festival of 1926. This second quartet is a great improvement over his first. He still has the fault (somewhat related, perhaps, to that of Bax) of constructing his music from small segments, almost invariably of equal length: he has the fatal habit of stating a phrase (two or four bars) and then repeating it at once verbatim. But despite its failings and its Debussy-like caste, this work has charm and distinction. It met with merited success.

The quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon) by the Bohemian, Karel Bohuslav Jirak, recalled in several ways the septuor by his compatriot, Haba, heard on the previous program: both showed the influences of Schönberg (in this case it was further removed) and of Hindemith; both were more or less atonal and both had something of the alertness, crispness and robustness which has come into German music with the advent of Hindemith. Jirak's work, however, seemed far better than that of Haba; the themes were more precise and plastic and the structure more comprehensible. It showed greater musicianship and a greater *élan vital*.

The *Moralités non Légendaires*, songs with accompaniment of diverse instruments, by the Belgian, Fernand Quinet, were not so amusing as they were obviously intended to be. A charming and ingenuous young lady sang a series of highly sophisticated epigrams, fables after the style of La Fontaine. One was intended, at the end of each, to smile audibly at his neighbor or to emit the involuntary and assenting "oh" or "ah." Some of us did not.

In spite of an admirable performance by the Pro Arte Quartet in collaboration with an excellent young saxophonist, the quintet for saxophone and strings by the Austrian, Karl Stimmer, failed to make a great impression; it lacked both inward compulsion and outward charm. The sonority of the saxophone in combination with the quartet was pleasant (suggesting excellent possibilities), though the saxophone might have been handled in a far more characteristic manner.

There remained on this program the admirable *Serenade* (clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, violin and cello) by Alfredo Ca-

sella, introduced to New York by the League of Composers in 1929, and the *Trio* for flute, viola and cello by Albert Roussel. The *Serenade* is one of Casella's most successful works; it is charming in its vein of lightness and gaiety and the writing for the instruments is prodigiously expert.

One of the outstanding works of the festival, however, was Roussel's trio. Written at the request of Mrs. Coolidge, the piece was performed at a Coolidge festival in Prague in 1929, one month after the order had been given. But here is no hasty workmanship; every note is in its place and the composer's inventiveness seems not for a moment to have flagged. It is written with sureness and delicacy; each movement has a life of its own and one is captivated by its rhythmic and melodic freshness, its harmonic charm, structural perfection and the consummate skill with which the composer has written for the medium in hand. Is it great music? That, indeed, is difficult to say. This writer, for one, was filled more with admiration than with love; he was more amused than moved. Roussel's music is cold; it is typically French. But in its way the trio is unquestionably a masterpiece.



The two orchestral concerts brought to light, on the whole, fewer good works than those heard in the concerts of chamber music. The first opened with *Musique pour Orchestre* by the Swiss composer, Volkmar Andreae. Mr. Andreae is obviously a musician of experience; his work has a certain sureness of touch. But interest flagged as the composition moved on from its turbulent and rather brilliant beginning. The abrupt close came as a disappointment; more had been expected. The *Sinfonietta* by Bernard Wagenaar, American, made a distinctly favorable impression. The work has been heard in America under the direction of Mengelberg. It is fresh, agreeable and unpretentious and its sonorities are always distinguished. One wishes that the themes were more plastic, that the composer had given us at least at the beginning of each movement something which we might grasp more firmly; even for a *sinfonietta* the themes are a bit too

slight. But the work has charm and animation and it obviously gave pleasure to the audience.

Casella conducted the *Sinfonia Italiana* by his young countryman, Antonio Veretti. The work has certain typically Italian qualities: exuberance and, in its nocturnal moments, a natural poetic charm. But on the whole it is mediocre and of a vulgarity which is nearly hopeless. *Ronde Burlesque* by Florent Schmitt will scarcely add to the stature of this well-established composer. The orchestration is brilliant but the musical material appeared heavy and lacking in contrasts. Loud and pretentious was the *Poème de l'Espace* by the Belgian, Marcel Poot. The composer aimed to portray an airplane flight from New York to Europe. He ends with a prolonged "apotheosis" which is, in its unconscious naïveté, amazing, to say the least.

Works by the Middle-Europeans, Ernst Pepping (German), Pavel Borkovec (Czech) and Karol Rathaus (who, though born in country which now is Polish, seems to belong with the Germans) were presented at the second orchestral concert. The qualities of this group which were common also to the previously heard works by Haba and Jirak were different enough from those of the Western European composers to present a sort of whole. Their music all inclines toward the atonal; it is complicated, difficult to listen to and, in many cases, tortured. Though rhythmically alert and sometimes agreeably robust in mood its strength is often merely external and the energy noisy. They are in the orbit of Hindemith rather than that of Stravinsky. This music is facile despite its apparent complexity; it appears to be manufactured according to some formula, a formula for "modern music." It lacks the clarity born of a deeper motivation. Of the works heard at this concert Pepping's was the most tortured, Borkovec's the weakest and Rathaus' the most successful.

William Walton, the young English composer, presented his new concerto for viola and orchestra. The work evidently came as something of a disappointment to those who had admired his *Portsmouth Point* overture and his *Façade*. There was not the robustness, the freshness and humor which had been expected. The concerto has, indeed, something of the academic and there are moments (melodies in thirds or sixths) which remind one of

Brahms, whose name (in those circles) is not to be praised. The orchestration is inclined to be gray and, except for certain moments, it lacks precision and clarity of intention. But when all of this is said the work still remains one of the bright spots of the festival. Here at least is a composer who seems to write from a sense of inner urge, whose themes emerge, finely chiseled, from somewhere within him deeper than the collar-line. Here is that ring of authenticity for which we are willing to sacrifice so much. A Viennese critic has said of Kodaly's *Psalmus Hungaricus* that it was more *empfunden* than *erfunden*. The same might perhaps be said of the Walton concerto; it is only repeated hearings which tell whether the good qualities of a work outweigh the bad. Walton's concerto impresses by its sense of earnestness; its feeling of inner conviction. He is a young man who has the temerity to be neither flippant nor audacious, who is preoccupied neither by the problem of "style" nor with the desire to make an effect. What particularly impressed the writer was the excellence of his melodic structure; his themes do not fumble, he presents them as he wants them to be. His gift, to judge from this work, is predominantly lyric. The phrase which brings the work to its close is of a beauty and a length of line, of a sustained expressiveness, truly rare. The work was magnificently played by Lionel Tertis.

Though in some respects not unrelated to the above, Johann-Matthias Hauer shows a personality far more clearly defined and more mature. In his concerto for violin and orchestra he writes music which is frankly atonal; but his sense of melodic design is unusually strong. Fascinating arabesques, firm and supple, are spread out before us by the violinist; the orchestral accompaniment seems far away, at times so detached as to appear almost non-existent. This music has a fault which we are taught in the conservatories to avoid (and rightly so): it has a top and a bottom but no middle! But this "weakness" becomes with Hauer a sort of strength. His use of the percussion is highly individual, rhythmically subtle and extraordinarily sensitive in color. One is reminded of the Varese of *Hyperprisms* and *La Croix de Sud*. But here the effects, though no doubt simpler on paper, come off more successfully. It is lean music, complex yet transparent; though on the surface it is aristocratic and aloof one feels it to

burn with a peculiar inward flame. Let us hope that something by Hauer will be heard in America before long.

One may speedily dismiss *Temptation* by the English composer, Henry Gibson. Built on a Gaelic marching-tune, its treatment offered little of interest and the work seemed quite out of place at these concerts. *Chant Funèbre* by the Frenchman, Jean Rivier, sounded well in a Debussy-like manner and both the ideas and their presentation were clear and untortured, in which respect it was an agreeable contrast to the music of the Middle-Europeans. But it shared with the work by Huybrechts the tendency toward a segmentary structure; it lacked contrasts and was rhythmically amorphous.

Marcel Mihalovici (a young Rumanian living in Paris) has undoubted talent. His *Fantaisie* had verve and the slow movement showed particular charm. He is not free from the influence of Stravinsky; one thought particularly of the *Sacre* and of *L'Oiseau de Feu*. But his music has a clear sense of tonality and also a structural clarity which are refreshing. Are these the influences of Paris or are the Rumanians indeed, as they would have us believe, the Latins of the East?

The concert came to a furious close with the only work out of Soviet Russia, *Steel Foundry*, by the young comrade, Alexander Mossolow. The work is what its name implies and its sounds will not be unfamiliar to the admirers of *Pacific 231*. It too is formula-music of a kind but its brevity, directness and unpretentiousness of structure make it effective and amusing. A tired public took advantage of the din to relax its strained nerves.



One of the important events of the festival was the performance of the *Stabat Mater*, for soloists, chorus and orchestra, by Karol Szymanowski. Szymanowski has not treated the words in an orthodox style but has written for them music in his usual manner, complex and rich, impressionistic and romantic. There are touches of the archaic—one senses ancient Poland as one has sensed medieval Hungary in Kodaly's *Psalmus Hungaricus*—but on the whole the translation of the words is personal and

direct. It is a work filled with tenderness and warmth, lofty and noble. But it is not wholly satisfactory. It seems to lack the sterner qualities; its rhythmic side is weak, the moments of energy too few. One wishes that Szymanowski had broken more often the nostalgic web in which he is so magically enmeshed, that the work were more closely knit, that it had been more cerebrally controlled. He is an artist so sympathetic in his approach to his art, so fine a craftsman and so sensitive a being; this work arouses regret that it is not the complete masterpiece of which Szymanowski seems so nearly capable.



Of the performances given "on the side-lines" of the festival, the most extraordinary was that of Alban Berg's much-discussed opera, *Wozzeck*, in the opera house of Aix-la-Chapelle, a performance given especially for the participants in the festival. It was amazing, scenically interesting and musically and dramatically of an authenticity and a vitality which are often lacking in the performances in our metropolitan theatres. *Wozzeck* was discussed at length in the pages of MODERN MUSIC at the time of its first Berlin performance in 1925. Since then it has made the rounds of the principal opera houses of Germany; it is the first work of its school to have attained more than a *succès d'estime*. Its secret is that it is theatrically immensely effective. The public is indifferent as to whether it is "tonal" or "atonal," is unaware that one of its scenes is constructed in the form of a passacaglia, another in the form of a scherzo; it knows only that Berg's music heightens enormously the march of events upon the stage. Many of the special public which heard *Wozzeck* on this occasion were of the opinion that it marks an important step in the development of music for the theatre, a step in line with the appearances, in their day, of *Pelléas et Mélisande* and of the *Sacre du Printemps*. The present writer is not of this opinion. It is not so much that *Wozzeck* appears to be at the end of a cul-de-sac (one does not expect to see myriads of *Wozzecks* flourishing on all sides), for all great art-works are culminating points rather than beginnings. It is, rather, that *Pelléas* and the *Sacre*, when they were

new, disclosed to us moods within ourselves of which we had but vaguely dreamt, emotions which, until then, had never been crystallized. *Wozzeck* has ferreted out no new caverns within our heart; its revelation is that of Schönberg and Wagner. It is a fascinating and moving work but its importance, the present writer believes, is largely theatrical.

In Brussels at the Palais des Beaux Arts a concert of chamber music was offered to the participants of the festival by the Pro Arte Quartet. The program contained a string quintet (two violins, two violas and cello) by Martinu, a young Czech who is living in Paris; a fresh and charming work by a man of real talent. His personality is perhaps not yet clearly defined and the writing is at times too facile, but it shows a natural and spontaneous gift. The quintet is one of the many new works to have come to life recently under the protecting wing of Mrs. Coolidge.

The fourth string quartet by Bela Bartok seems to be a novelty of prime importance. The writing for the strings is masterly and completely characteristic of the composer. There are the acrid dissonances, the savage rhythms, the pulsating vitality, the feeling of structural inevitability which we know from other of Bartok's works; the music rushes along like a pack of wild dogs unleashed. The slow movement evokes an exotic night, a mood not unreminiscent of Bloch; there is a throbbing recitative, passionately declaimed against a sustained and vibrating chord, a tremulous and unearthly cembalom. There are distant night-calls of strange birds. But it is all done without a trace of sentimentality; one feels the exoticism to be not something laid on but something inherent in the personality of the composer. The last movement is, in its thematic material, the most obviously national; but the whole quartet, though the work of a highly-specialized individual, a musician thinking in terms of music, has its roots, one feels, deep in the racy soil of Hungary. One need not despair of contemporary music so long as works of this calibre are being produced. The performance by the Pro Arte Quartet was superlatively fine.

Little was added to the value or interest of the program by the performance of Milhaud's *La Création du Monde* in an arrangement which the composer has made especially for the Pro Arte

Quartet. This work has little to offer as a piece of chamber music. Still less can be said for the excerpts from Satie's opera *Relâche* played on the piano by M. Paul Collaer.



The concert which actually opened the festival, to go from the last to the first, was one given by the "Guides," that extraordinary Belgian military band which, under the leadership of Captain Prevost seems to play Sousa and Stravinsky with equal ease. The program was long. It contained four Belgian works of which by far the best was the *Pièce Symphonique* by Joseph Jongen, a brilliant and effective piano-concerto in the style of Rachmaninoff. *Spiel* by Ernst Toch is not among the best compositions by this composer; it is too slight, too facile and its light-heartedness seems self-conscious. Toch is a sophisticated person; his efforts at naïveté do not ring true. Of considerably greater weight was the *Konzertmusik* by Paul Hindemith, Opus 41. In spite of a certain heaviness one admired again the now familiar characteristics of this young German leader, his vitality, his suppleness, his prodigious command of the materials in hand. Particularly admirable is the rhythmic structure of his phrases, vigorous and elastic, as though guided by an intelligence eternally alert.

Dionysiaques by Florent Schmitt is again a brilliant and expert piece of orchestration but its musical material had a certain oriental quality which was particularly unsympathetic.

The bright moment of the concert, in fact to the present writer the highest moment of the festival, was the performance of Stravinsky's *Sinfonies d'Instruments à Vent*. Written in memory of Debussy in 1920 this work has a dignity and an authenticity which put it in a class by itself, far removed from the remaining contemporaneous music heard at the festival. Its structure recalls the last quartets by Beethoven; its content is evocative and solemn. Surely no more noble musical tribute has ever been paid by one composer to another. It is unfortunate that it is heard so seldom in America. It supplies a link for which many are look-

ing; one sees in it clearly the transition from the style of the *Sacre* to that of the piano concerto. Here is the first touch of neo-classic together with something of the emotional intensity of Stravinsky's earlier style. And in addition it shows Stravinsky in a mood which is unquestionably unique. To the present writer it seems one of his loftiest and most touching works.

[It remains to be noted that there were, in addition to the above concerts, performances of old music: choral music of the Netherlands masters and some remarkable songs from the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, admirably brought to light and life by M. Ives Tinayre; and there were performances in the opera-houses in Brussels and Liège.]