

MESSIAEN'S LANGUAGE: BIRDS AND BUTTERFLIES

ANALYSES are mental curiosae: they are voyages for us into the mode of thought of another human being. To others they are rarely of constructive value and, even to their creators, they are, it seems to me, more valuable as a process of thought than for any concrete revelations they may or may not make. This may be said of the theoretical works of Hindemith and Krenek. And it may also be said of the unusually interesting *Technique de mon langage musical* by the French composer, Olivier Messiaen, published, I gather, in 1945 (copyright 1944) by Alphonse Leduc in Paris (in French, of course).

Messiaen, whose compositions are insufficiently known in this country — though a small number of them have been performed with success by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and at the concerts of the League of Composers and of France Forever — is one of the younger group of French intellectuals whose output is strongly impregnated with Catholic mysticism. It is natural, therefore, that his theoretical interest should center itself primarily in vocal music (in contrast to Hindemith, whose inspiration, even in his vocal music, is so strongly instrumental in character). And we have, indeed, in the juxtaposition of Messiaen and Hindemith but one more example of an age-old situation: that duality of musical approach which, without probing into the more distant past, we may consider as being the respective approaches of Palestrina and of Bach. Messiaen has tried to penetrate for us some of the mys-

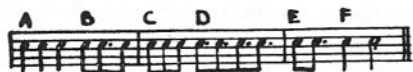
teries of Gregorian Chant. He brings us some illuminating examples of Hindu music. And he acknowledges musical indebtedness to "the mountains of Dauphiny" . . . to *Pelléas et Mélisande* and, quite simply, . . . "to the birds." (!)

It is difficult to notate the unusual and subtle deviations in a music which is tonally and rhythmically free in performance: the irregularities of pitch and of rhythm of, say, the music of our American Indians. Our system of musical notation is scarcely adequate to record that which it was intended to record: the music of civilized Europe of the past few hundred years, a music one of whose chief functions has been the organized regularization of the realm of sound. In his musical illustrations Messiaen has undertaken a difficult and well-nigh futile task. It is almost as though he had tried to harness the butterfly. But the attempt "had to be made" and there is about his book a sense of inevitability which gives it its importance. It is as different as possible from the Hindemith and Krenek books . . . and from Schönberg's twelve-tone system.

There are charming examples of rhythmic irregularities which add to the fluidity of a musical phrase and which, if not pushed too far, could add greatly to the "rhythmic repertoire" of a young composer as well as to "musical language" in general. And Messiaen — he quotes copiously from his own works — has used them consciously.

The general treatment of his sub-

ject is warm and not academic. Unlike some German theoreticians, he does not scold his readers. Rather does he try to charm and seduce them; for there is tenderness – perhaps even to the point of fatuousness – in this book of theory. It all assumes an exactness of musical reproduction on the part of the performer that is compatible with the high standard of solfeggiazation (if I may coin a word) which is so uniquely that of the French. And if we are amazed by the extreme religiousness of the emotional concepts we must also be impressed by the mathematical exactness of their musical embodiment. From one small section of the *Musical Examples* I quote a title: *Praise to the Immortality of Jesus, Ecstatic Chant in the Midst of a Sombre Landscape, the Celestial Banquet*; here, on the other hand, is a specimen of a rhythmic scheme, obviously minutely calculated:



The pseudo-mysticism of Scriabin and the no less pseudo-scientific exactitude of the later Stravinsky seem here to have met. Are these qualities invalid because they are quasi-pseudo? I believe not entirely so: for no individual, no matter how persuaded he may be of his own theories, has exactly found the truth for the rest of us; but he may, nevertheless, have indicated a path which is both fruitful and edifying.

There is a short chapter, with illustrations, devoted to birdsongs. Amazing as it may seem, this chapter is very evocative and stimulating along the line of possible new melodic developments. Messiaen quotes his own teacher, Paul Dukas, as having said: "Listen to the birds, they are the great master." Is this fantastic? Perhaps, but not entirely so!

There is a classification of Debussy's harmony of "added notes" – far less valid than the tables in which Hindemith classifies chords according to the acoustically persuasive strength of the various harmonic intervals; there is a list of apparently random chord progressions which might be expanded ad infinitum. All of these, inchoate as they may seem, are the cerebrations of an active and imaginative musical personality.

The book will have its value for those of us who are mentally curious along the lines of analysis and classification. It is inspiring to note that it has been published in France during days which must have been difficult, to say the least. I do not believe that it will add materially to an understanding of the musical works of the author; these works must, and will, stand on their own. Its main contribution, it seems to me, is in the realm of rhythm and in the fact that any new musical approach must be stimulating to those of us who believe that the gates are still open.

Frederick Jacobi

A TALE OF THREE CITIES

THREE new books, a little rigidly cast in Story of the Ballet form, tell us something fresh about dancing in London, Moscow and

New York. *Soviet Ballet* (Collins, London, 1945) is in fact a revelation. Miss Iris Morley lived in Moscow during the 1944-45 season, attended