

STUDY OF A RECENT FRENCH MOVEMENT

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SINCE Strawinsky's *Pulcinella* there have appeared in France a certain number of works by composers belonging to the *avant-garde* which form a singular, bright spot on the international horizon. To mention the most characteristic, they are the five ballets—*Les Biches* by Poulenc, *Les Fâcheux* and *Les Matelots* by Auric, *Le Train Bleu* and *Salade* by Darius Milhaud; a few instrumental works—Poulenc's sonatas for wind instruments and the piano concerto of Germain Tailleferre. Differing in certain details of style they are closely related by a new and distinctive technique.

Nearly all have won a heartening welcome from the public—due, in the case of the ballets, largely to the music. They have inspired a ready sympathy and response which is quite rare in the history of the *avant-garde*. Let us therefore analyze this fusion of the boldest modernisms with the lasting elements of immediate auditory pleasure, to discover how it is obtained and what simple elements make up the new sonorous combination.

At a first hearing of these extraordinary works the most striking impression comes from the choice of themes. With certain rare exceptions they have two well-defined origins, popular airs reproduced almost exactly or in a studied, grotesque revision, and musical ideas characteristic of the eighteenth century Italian school (Pergolesi, Scarlatti), which in their clear-cut rhythm and simple melodic line are not very remote from popular music.

These clear, direct and sharply-defined subjects, familiar or almost so, carry an accent of truth, of real life. The suspicion of strangeness always so inimical to new works is removed by their popular character, and they at once receive the approval of the public which is usually so mistrustful of invention, of the rare, the precious, the unknown.

The choice of "living" themes is not the only distinction. The manner of exploiting them is also curious. This predilection for popular airs has been expressed in the past; Chopin, Liszt, Rimsky-Korsakow, to mention but a few, have each in his way employed them, giving us mazurkas, rhapsodies, operas and symphonic fragments. In France certain composers, belonging chiefly to the school of d'Indy, have incorporated them in chamber music and also in operas. But all these men sought to give such themes a framework not foreign to their origin, whose rhythm, harmony and architecture should be in strict and obvious accord with them, a feature which lent to their work a character of conviction, respect, often of importance.

Poulenc, Auric and Milhaud, on the contrary, employ a structure at variance with the demands of their subjects, the latter being simple, often brutal, even vulgar. The framework is ornamented by a dazzling and subtle technique. From this deliberate misconception, this piquant contrast, there proceeds an impression of humor and sometimes buffoonery. The composer is not identified with the themes he presents. He disclaims the responsibility of their musical value; if they are vulgar he is not repelled but accords them impartial treatment. The air of detachment, of wilful irresponsibility, of disrespect for thematic invention which ranked so high with the romantics, gives to their work a striking objectivity that would appear almost impersonal if the technique of the composition were not there to proclaim the existence of the author.

In its general aspects this technique can be characterized as follows: from the harmonic point of view, the free use of dissonance whether as a result of polytonality or of intervals produced by passing notes or by notes arbitrarily added to the chords, writing that is frequently contrapuntal, especially in Auric and Milhaud; diatonic melodic lines often developed in disconnected intervals; frequent use of staccato with the object of getting a cutting and dry quality; from the rhythmic point of view, either formulas borrowed from eighteenth century dances, or more often, from the stubborn and abrupt rhythms of *Petrouchka*, with the displacement of strong beats and the accenting of weak beats; finally a very original metrical system which offers great future possibili-

ties. To really appreciate it one should study the system employed from the time of the romantics to Debussy. In one guise or another the four measure form dominates, with bases inflexible at phrase junctions, every measure discreetly limiting its number of beats, and each phrase its number of measures. Occasionally a timid attempt is made to shorten a transition that is too heavy or to broaden one that is too short. The predetermined periods, with their uniform gait, weigh down works whose content is often lofty. The dismal regularity so contrary to life, which is fantastic and unforeseen, negates the exquisite melodic curves, the free swing of the theme; they are anchored to earth by the banal beat which a metrical device too hostile to uncertainty and danger imposes on them.

The metrical form of the works we are considering, on the other hand, has a happy vital fancy which shortens or accents; gives full scope to a theme, hastening the beginning, delaying the end; does not hesitate to lessen the beats of a too garrulous measure, or to leap over transitions, to jostle heavy phrases against each other or to make them bow politely; which, in short, juggles with the bars of a measure between whose pirouettes the music advances happy, delirious, living, fresh, straight to its goal.



This music also repudiates Wagnerian chromaticism, the pathetic and the lyric spirit, and refuses any relation with philosophic, literary or pictorial ideas. All that is mysterious and obscure is discarded. It must live in the full light, controlled by the mind and the will. These tendencies give the orchestration a cutting sharpness. There are only flat tints, crude timbres, scintillating rhythms, achieved by a bold attack. Are not these composers magnificently superior to their contemporaries in the direct effect of their works, utilizing as they do all the resources of a lively modernism in the service of themes quickly and agreeably comprehensible?

Scriabine, ill-digested, poorly imitated, weighs heavily upon Russia. Witness the production of sonatas, of ecstatic and mystic

poems whose chromaticism is disorganized, full of half understood literary and philosophic references, an output that is weak, half-mad, without air, light or form. The Germans carve their path on memories of Brahms and Mahler in over-burdened counter-point with sticky ideas, or turn their ear towards Austria and hum sentimental airs.

The Austrians hypnotize themselves with the sonorous utterance of Schoenberg. The Italians hurl themselves back on the tradition of Rossini. The Spaniards have their inexhaustible folklore. The Czechs and the Poles build delicate harmonies on the slim lines of their rhapsodies. In France some go back to Debussy or Fauré, some enroll under the banner of Ravel, others, somewhat isolated, follow a path clear or obscure as their products happen either to be understood or rejected.

In this international musical *mêlée* the bold works of our young group appear to be almost the standards of rescuers, clear, fresh, devoid of all that is not pure music.

But alas, the great role is not to be fulfilled by them.

The extraordinary contrast between an original, well-planned technique and themes whose facility is often vulgar, not to say platitudinous, the piquant misconception from which there spring so fresh a gaiety and so mordant a humor, is a two-edged sword. In a single work it reveals the author favorably as a bold eclectic, like the great classical composers taking what he needs where he finds it. But in a system it raises doubts of his capacity for invention. Indeed, this sustained disregard of originality becomes disquieting. Modesty appears excessive when so much care and fruitful research give life and growth to musical matter which is often of base extraction, and in the end it arouses the suspicion of poor taste and even impotence.



It is of course difficult to create an entirely new and perfected technique and at the same time fill this framework with sonorous material of as fine a quality. Perhaps the very nature of this technique demands that it be applied only to impersonal and facile

themes. I, for one, do not believe this to be the case; I place more confidence in their methods than do even the composers. But in order to justify them they must produce ideas that are more vital, more refined and above all more individual. For to what purpose now is this brilliant harmonic, rhythmic, metrical form? It exists for almost nothing, for poor, aged, hackneyed phrases, vulgar ideas, pseudo-classic formal themes.

All this dazzling machine of steel with its thousand delicate movements whirls in emptiness; an objective is absent, the intangible musical thing itself fails to appear. What a sublime spectacle! The mysterious essence flees those who pursue the mystery. The sad display of fireworks is in honor of one not present, it is a mournful, richly attired skeleton. And here, perhaps, lies the secret of the bitterness one feels beneath the apparent gaiety bursting from the muted trombone or the flourishes of the bassoon; of the inquietude, the feverishness concealed beneath the mocking assurance.

Why cannot those who have found this intangible inspiration, liberate it from its imprisoning, coarse veinstone? Why do those who today so splendidly carve their sonorous material nearly always employ mud to make their statues?

