

THE WEST FACES EAST

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NEVER, I believe, in all history has there been a more accelerated interchange between Orient and Occident than is now taking place. North Africa today is the center of Oriental culture. Westerners to be sure, have ruled over this and other territories of the Near East for centuries. But the long static conditions of peace never have the powerful catalytic effect of war. Cities, villages, desert settlements and oases now become the scene of daily changing contacts between Europeans, Americans and various African ethnic groups. In these hectic days the East yields its spirit to the West with a more feverish intensity of feeling, thought and habit.

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When in the past has the East exerted its greatest influence on Europe? At the time of the Crusades, of Moorish rule in Spain, and of the Turkish wars – all periods of fierce battle between Islam and Christianity. How much cultural material, and particularly how much music has penetrated from East to West during these times has never yet been fully assayed. We know of course that many of our musical instruments, particularly the strings, have come to us from the East, and that the principle of variation on which our entire musical system rests, is of Oriental origin. And are not our notation, which is built on the chironomy of the Alexandrian grammarians, and the Gregorian chorale and a hundred other important institutions in Occidental music out of the East?

For many centuries the bridge between East and West was Spain. During the nineteen-hundreds, Eastern influence came by way of the Balkans. Russia too has served as a transmission belt for Byzantine elements. Many instrumental forms from beyond the Pyrenees are of Arab origin, as for instance the baroque chaconne, passacaglia and sarabande. There are even some who believe these originated in South America; my own conviction is that they arose first in the Orient, traveled to South America via Spain, and then returned in changed form to Spain and from there reached out over all of Europe. In a poem that Simon Agudo wrote for the wedding of Philip III in 1599, much is made of a desire to go to Tam-

pico in Mexico there to dance the chaconne. The famous Spanish poet, Lope de Vega, in 1618 said unequivocally that the dance had come from "Indias" (America) to Seville. No doubt these dances had their origin in the sailor dives of Seville, at that time the port of entry for many lively, if not always respectable importations from America. So, curiously enough, in an earlier day America serves as bridge between Europe and Asia.

Here let us recall another early American-Arabian connection, the laments of the Indian population of the Quichoa. The descendants of the Incas of Peru are still the most musical of Indian tribes. Albert Friedenthal reports that the songs of the native Indians aroused little interest among the Spaniards, with the exception of these very Quichoas. The laments of the Quichoas are called "Yaravi," an Indian word that has no slightest kinship with any others in the language of the Quichoas or Aimaras. It is well known however that the Spanish language of Moorish times was enriched by many Arab words. Contemporary Spaniards had undoubtedly often heard from the Moors the expression, familiar to everyone traveling along the northern coast of Africa today, which issues daily from thousands of throats as a call, a sigh, a song, "Ya Rabi" (O Lord) that sums up the whole melancholy and longing of the Oriental. The Spanish language has not retained this word, but it is certainly possible that Spaniards of the Conquista period, who must have known it, were reminded of the "Ya Rabi" of the Moors when they heard the laments of the Inca Indians; or even that among them were people of Moorish descent who brought these exclamations to South America where they were afterwards permanently retained.

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I have purposely seized upon these historic details in order to show what special influence the hinterland may exert on the course of musical development. Arabia-Spain-America-Spain-Europe! But Western and Arabian music have met both earlier and later in the course of history. Those two Italian cities which were the great world centers of music for the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Venice and Naples, were the portals through which Oriental culture flowed. It was from this area that the movement against the traditional Occidental diatonic system took its impetus. Nicola Vicentino, of Venetian origin, was the father of chromaticism. He built a thirty-one interval Arcicembalo, which is not only a predecessor of the present-day quarter-tone clavier of Alois Haba

but also of the Universal Clavicymbal of the Hollander, Carl Luyton. The arch-chromaticist, the "Schönberg of the Renaissance," however, was Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, born in Naples. Of course all the enharmonists and chromaticians of the Renaissance – that is all those who attacked the medieval diatonic tonal system – claimed for their own systems a derivation from classical antiquity. They were, nevertheless, unconscious exponents of that linear musical culture which is essentially Oriental in character, and in exact contradiction to the European music of simultaneous harmony conditioned by the upper voice. From Vicentino and Luyton the road leads directly to Haba, the representative of modern European quarter-tone music. Haba is a Czech and belongs to a musical culture close to the East. In him we have an embodiment of the mutual relation between Oriental and modern Occidental musical practice.

Ten years ago, Cairo was host to a congress for Arabian music. The best of all the Arab orchestras participated and there were exhaustive discussions of theory and musical science, as well as much comparative measuring of the intervals in the Arab tonal system. It was evident from start to finish that the East is not inclined to sacrifice its own system of greater and smaller intervals for the glamor of European music. Haba was the main speaker at the congress, and a quarter-tone piano was used, built by the Czechoslovak firm, Foerster, especially with the Arab tonal system in mind. The Egyptian delegates recognized Haba's tempered quarter and sixth tone system as the basis of their own, and in this way gave official sanction to his music.

I do not know what has been the fate of Haba's music in Africa since then. Haba himself, however, has grown more and more interested in Oriental music. Though not a Jew, he was asked by the Prague center for Jewish culture, shortly before the Hitler invasion, to notate the traditional thousand year old *Neginote* of the Prague "alt-neu" Synagogue. Haba carried out the task successfully, being one of the few who, because of his unbelievably sensitive ear, can distinguish the tiny intervals and commit them to writing. Jewish synagogue singing in Europe, so far as it has not been "reformed," is in itself a living monument to Oriental music, just as is genuine Gregorian singing of the Catholic church. Some years ago the musicologist, Heinrich Berl, in his book, *Das Judentum in der Musik*, advanced the theory, since hotly contested, that Occidental culture is plastic and spatial, Oriental culture musical and temporal. In musical terms this means that the Occidental product is characterized by simultaneous har-

mony, the Oriental by pure harmony and rhythm. Until their emancipation the music of the Jews followed Oriental principles. About 1800, when they made contact with the broad stream of European music, they continued to advance the anti-harmonic Oriental principle of pure melody, as opposed to Occidental harmonic music. Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer have shown how creative this linearism can be, just as does Offenbach who always uses the same harmonic turns for his rhythmic and melodic ideas. The true linear principle, however, is carried out fully in Europe for the first time by Schönberg, whose twelve-tone school is made up so largely of musicians of Jewish descent. Schönberg, Berl points out, unlike Debussy and the impressionists who broke through the system of harmonized thinking by destroying it entirely, has gone back for his first principle to Oriental music. If Berl is right, then Jews in the twentieth century have played a role like that of the enharmonists and chromaticians in Vienna and Naples during the Renaissance. They are present-day exponents of the anti-harmonic system. Let us remember at this point that all the Jewish musical traditions of the middle ages were of Arabian origin, and were materially bound in the Arabian system of intervals.

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In the music of our time we recognize a continually increasing Oriental influence. Classical and romantic harmony with its principle of suspense and solution so characteristic of the Occident is constantly being challenged. The dynamic Faustian tension of spiritual life is perfectly represented by the tension and resolution of dissonance. Of all this the Oriental knows nothing. To him music, if I may use a metaphor of Hanslick's, is only an interplay of tonally moving forms, a mosaic of ornament which corresponds exactly to his contemplative or ecstatic state of mind. Today our own modern music, as exemplified in the twelve-tone system, is abandoning the old harmony of suspense. Schönberg's melodies need no suspensions or resolutions, nor do they have them. The leading tone thus becomes obsolete. The melody despite all loss of harmony and counterpoint, goes its own way, following the laws of pure melody, while the polyphony is frequently relieved by the old, more primitive form of heterophony which is found in the music of the Orient.

On hearing one of those ecstatic dances of the Balinese or Javanese, with their rhythmic complications and counter-rhythms, their heterophony and their daring mixtures of tonal color, one recognizes a fascinating simi-

larity to the works of the French impressionists. The psychological basis is the same; instead of concern with soul states music here is ecstatic, playful – music for its own sake.

And finally, with the emergence of the national Slavic schools of Czechs, Poles and Russians, as well as of the Hungarians, other elements of Oriental origin have made their way into European music. To a lesser degree American jazz, built on Negro culture – which in turn through its African origin is related to the culture of the Near East – has exerted its anti-Western influence. The modern emphasis on rhythm and further destruction of the old European tonal system are additional evidence.

Music in the nineteenth century was still predominantly European. In the twentieth it is definitely so no longer. Just as Europe, through America, Russia and the East, has lost its monopoly on so many things, so too its hegemony over music has been challenged by almost all the peoples of the earth. As the old saying has it, "ex oriente lux."