

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

## MUSIC WRITTEN FOR FRENCH FILMS

THE relation between music and the motion pictures presents certain problems which it is interesting even to state. Should the musical accompaniment of a film be, as some people think, merely an anaesthetic to foreign sounds, a means of removing the spectator from the outside world so that he may the more completely give his attention to the screen or should the sound describe step by step the course of the projected action? Should one seek absolute synchronization between the music and the detail of each scene, each gesture, each expression, or, on the contrary, is it sufficient in a broad way to describe the spirit of each episode?

A number of French composers, and among them the best, have been intrigued by these questions and have solved them in various fashions. Without ever having written directly for the motion pictures, Darius Milhaud has several very interesting ideas on this point to which he has given expression in an adaptation of familiar music (the selection being confined to French works) for *L'Inhumaine*, a film by Maurice L'Herbier. For him, the musical accompaniment finds its inspiration in general psychological reasons, without concerning itself too much with the details of the film. It must represent the underlying idea, the spiritual development, rather than the superficial aspects. Thus at the very beginning of *L'Inhumaine* there is an accompaniment composed of several fragments from Rameau even though the film shows a jazz band entering a room and beginning to play. Similarly, for a scene at a theatre with a crowd violently stirred by conflicting emotions and gradually calmed by the song of an actress, the music, employing I believe a melody of Gounod, does not represent the voice of the singer and in no way interprets the excitement of the crowd.

Arthur Honegger has produced a hybrid for *Le Rail*, a picture by Abel Gance in which locomotives and railroads play an important role. One part of this music was his own composition, the other, by far the greater, was an arrangement. Moreover, one of the principle obstacles in the way of writing original music for the motion pictures seems to be the usual length of the film. To write and orchestrate one and one-half hours of music necessarily demands a considerable length of time from a composer, a number of months of labor without much possibility of having this work remain in repertoire.

The most interesting feature of Honegger's music was the part written to introduce the figures at the beginning of the picture. The short motif, developed rapidly, formed a sort of sonorous portrait of each actor. An interesting mechanical innovation, employed here for the first time, the *ciné-pupitre*, called *Delacommune* after its inventor, by a system of automatic regulation between the metronomic movement and the speed of unrolling the film, brought about a relatively close union between the music and the picture.

The first piece of French music written expressly for motion pictures was, I believe, a fragment composed in 1912 by Michel Maurice Lévy for the *Tenth Symphony*, a film by Gance, which had a true musical value. In 1924, Henri Rabaud, at that time director of the Conservatory of Paris, wrote an important piece of music for a film by Raymond Bernard, *Le Miracle des Loups*, based on an episode in the history of the Middle Ages. M. Rabaud had the chance to accompany an altogether excellent film, one of the best French productions. His score, a trifle facile and conventional in spots, does not lack charm. If the love scenes or the war episodes seem rather banal, the popular aspects are nevertheless quite excellently interpreted.

Recently at the Opera we witnessed the presentation of *Salambo*, made from Flaubert's novel, accompanied throughout by the music of Florent Schmitt. This composer did not have Rabaud's opportunity, for *Salambo* is a mediocre film production from which life and movement are nearly entirely absent. But the subject could not be without its fascination for the talent of Florent Schmitt, so extraordinarily sensitive to color, to the barbaric and at the same time refined sumptuousness of the Orient. With sweeping

strokes he has painted a large fresco, now brutal, now delicate, in which are represented all the passions that can live under the fiery sun of Africa.

The orchestral color is quite beautiful as is always the case with Schmitt, at times terrifying and mysterious, at times harsh and exciting. But it is my opinion that it would be easier to judge the music of *Salambo* in the concert hall than at the motion picture theatre, for its essential quality lies in this color. With the films, the "art of black and white" as they are sometimes called, it is not so much color that is important as the theme, movement and vitality. Hearing the music of *Salambo*, one often has the impression of marking time, of not advancing. And then during most of the scenes the synchronization between the visual and the auditory elements is hardly ever achieved in a precise manner. It is indeed difficult for a composer to exactly follow the duration of each scene, of each gesture, even when he does conform to the time schedule which is given him. At rehearsals he is often obliged to add three measures here, take out five there in order to maintain the balance, a condition which threatens the unity of the music.

A composer who has admirably provided against this pitfall is Erik Satie. In writing music for a film by Picabia, entitled *Entracte*, which appears in the ballet *Relâche*, Satie has employed a method whose expressive value Strawinsky demonstrated some years ago—that of repetition. It is true that the repetitions of Satie are nothing like those of Strawinsky. One might just as well compare them to the continuous restatements which Schubert makes of some of his themes. But without Strawinsky would Satie have dared to take a melodic and rhythmic group of notes, repeat them without change during a whole scene, and then pass abruptly to another group at the beginning of the next scene? The number of repetitions is not indicated, it is the conductor's function to decide. Furthermore, some of these motifs are quite relevant, for example the waltz accompanying the movements of a dancer in a strange perspective. Another theme, accompanying a burial scene, lends itself very well to the rapid movements of the macabre buffooneries. But this method can hardly apply except in the case of very special films, like *Entracte*, which have no connection with real life and are rather experiments in a laboratory of aesthetics.

Very interesting is Satie's use of percussion, which, although simple, at times dominates the orchestra and produces a fine dynamic effect.

An intensive use of percussion, bringing out the rhythmic aspects of the music, sometimes creates a mechanical atmosphere. To adapt himself to this mechanical phase of motion pictures is an interesting road for the composer to follow. George Antheil, an American musician living in Paris, and Fernand Leger, a French painter, have attempted a sort of musical photographic conception, entitled *Ballet Mécanique*. Leger screens not living beings but certain objects, real, distorted or imaginary, moving at constantly varying speeds, and so obtains curious effects of rhythm and of volume. The music, directly derived from *Le Sacre du Printemps*, is written for sixteen mechanical pianos, for xylophones and drums. A powerful dynamic spirit courses through this work. Insistent repetitions of group sounds made up of more than fifteen notes are found side by side with extremely choppy and broken rhythms. But the work appears to be able to stand alone or at all events suggests various possibilities of plastic realization.

Among the films whose origin lies in pure aesthetic research, one could mention *A Quoi Rêvent Les Jeunes Filles* by Count Etienne de Beaumont, the music by Roger Désormières, one of the members of the young school at Arcueil whose patron was Erik Satie. The work has the sub-title, *Reflections, Faces, Speed*. One sees a patchwork of changes in crystals and gems, views of faces, the bewildering rush of subway trains. At the outset the music employs contrapuntal effects in the form of spirited canons; it achieves finally an intense dynamic power. The whole thing is conceived not exactly in the form of repetitions such as Satie's, but in parts which can be extended.

Among works in preparation I should like to mention that of a quite young composer of great promise, Jacques Benoist-Méchin, who plans to give an important part to the films in his ballet *L'Enfant Prodigue*.

The composers first named, Rabaud, Florent Schmitt and the rest, have written music for the motion pictures exactly as they would for the theatre, for a ballet or for a pantomime; the last have attempted to create music specifically adapted to a special kind of

picture, still in its embryonic state, the art film. Have they fully succeeded? I think not, despite all that is interesting in their work. In any case, their compositions seem destined to remain remote from the great public, limited to narrow circles. Many artists (Milhaud, and, among the critics, Prunières) believe that in order to achieve a true art work the music should precede the film and that the actors should be governed by the sound of the music which is to accompany the performance. This may be suited to films related to pure dancing but for works of intense dramatic action necessitating a large cast, realization seems a little more difficult. But the attempt should certainly be made.

*By Raymond Petit*

#### UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS IN GERMANY

THE union of Germanic and Austrian elements in North Germany is an important feature in recent musical developments. Driven by economic pressure from Vienna, musicians and authors are pouring into Berlin, where the spiritual and artistic tension is so great that every outside stimulus is welcomed with joy.

To be recorded at the head of the page is Arnold Schoenberg's appointment as professor of a master-school at the Berlin Academy, a fact which, of course, will not be without special consequences. These, it is to be hoped, will take quite another form from those made known to us in Vienna. The earlier Schoenberg who fostered so high a degree of conscience in his pupils, converted them into pessimists. They hardly dared to advance a step for fear of repudiating the words of their teacher. Today Schoenberg recognizes himself as one of the "arrived". His philosophy is more cheerful, and no matter how highly he values versatile ability (which for him means an ability grounded in counterpoint), it is to be assumed that he will not draw too tight a rein on the creative fervor of his young followers.

However, one of his faithful band, who for a long time seemed to be retarded rather than advanced by the master's teachings, as a result of this discipline, has produced a masterpiece. The name of Alban Berg has long been known to the initiated, but how many of his works had reached the larger public? One knew