

## ROUSSEL — AVE, VALE

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**F**RENCH music is in mourning. A short time ago Paul Dukas left us. Now it is Roussel who withdraws and whose departure we lament.

It was known, of course, that Roussel had contracted pneumonia several months ago and that his life hung on a thread, but when the news came of his death at Royan, no one could for the moment believe that the composer of *Padmavati* was dead. Because Roussel, although close to seventy, was the youngest of us all. His smiling reserve was complemented by the greatest wisdom. But his wisest action was knowing how to stay young. I am of the opinion that Roussel was as young when he left us as was Schubert, who died in his thirties. And yet it was just before the war, around 1913 or 1914 that he burst on our world. I still recall the striking way in which Jacques Rouché, who now directs the opera, staged the ballet, *Festin de l'Araignée*, at a little Théâtre des Arts, not far from Montmartre, which he had turned into the most interesting of the experimental theatres.

In 1912 or 1913 Roussel gave up his professorship in the Schola Cantorum, then directed by Vincent d'Indy. Many of the best musicians of today had been under his instruction: Roland Manuel, I know, and certainly Georges Auric. But apart from these particular examples, I do not believe that there is a single French musician who would be what he is today if Roussel had not existed. It is plain enough that Roussel and Honegger are entirely different types of artists, but I believe that many of the harmonic combinations of Honegger owe just as much to Roussel as they do to Schönberg or Stravinsky.

He represented not an external influence making itself felt by direct contact, but rather a subtle infiltration into the spirit. He strengthened the forces of good taste and intelligence from within.

The pre-war period was the time of the *First Sonata* for piano and violin, of melodies so quickly sung everywhere, like the *Bachelier de Salamanque* and *I'Indiscret*. The first sonata contains a lyricism which seems lacking in many of the following works. But it too reappears much later in the "second youth" of the musician. During the period of his fifties, when the beard which he wore quite short was turning grey around his smile, Roussel brought forth his great works. The law of the "three periods" is completely confirmed by this composer. It was toward the close of his life that he returned, with *Odes anacréontiques*, to the melodic vein of the *Bachelier*, the *Sarabande* and so on to the ballet with *Enée* which he recently composed in Brussels. Finally it was toward the close of his life, with the two great symphonies, the wonderful *Suite in F*, that there came a complete flowering of the intense lyricism which had been so powerful only in the *First Sonata*, the *Trio* and his other early music.

Between these two periods there flourished to our great good fortune, what might be called the Rousselian Scherzo. The happiest product of this interest in the scherzo seems to me to be not the opera performed last winter in Paris, but the wonderful *Sérénade* for flute, strings and harp.

I can never hear it without seeing Roussel in the setting of Varangeville, that tiny seaside resort on the Normandy coast where the composer found the serenity that was essential for his work. I see him again among the delicate colors of his villa, bending over the roses in his garden, so rare, so carefully nurtured. He walks with an alert step in the pine forests, through which he can occasionally glimpse the sea. This old sailor (like Rimsky-Korsakov he started life as a navy officer) was closer to the trees than he was to the waves. Remember, for example, what an intimate understanding the *Poème de la forêt* reveals. For me this work holds the greatest concentration of secrets in the language of Roussel.

Other visions spring up. Once more I see Roussel with Segovia, studying the mechanism of the guitar, a contact which inspired those exquisite selections that he called *Segovia*. I see him again dining at the same Parisian table with Arnold Schönberg and the aged French Prime Minister, Paul Painlevé.

But it is Varangeville that calls back the supreme vision. Roussel loved life and all the pleasures of life. Discretion and modesty were allied in him with a certain epicureanism. But yet the aspect of death was always familiar. The first time I came to see him in his Norman villa—it must have been twelve or fifteen years ago—he took me to the cemetery and showed me the tomb reserved for him, with a simple gentleness altogether devoid of sentimentality. This cemetery in Varangeville is perhaps one of the most beautiful spots in the world. And in a certain sense its aspect is in harmony with the personality of the man we mourn. The enclosure holding the tombs evokes only gentleness, smiling images; that summer it was a veritable bower of verdure and flowers. Yet it lies at the edge of a high cliff with a sheer drop to the sea, and so it is just as if one were at the center of the glaucous, the milky vastness of the maritime horizon.