

A GLANCE TOWARD THE LEFT

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WITHOUT harking back to those worthy Leipzigers who mistook Siegfried's horn call for the crack of doom, we can all of us extract from comparatively recent experience pertinent musical examples bearing on the immemorial conflict between old and new. Thirty years ago and less that estimable *Biedermann* of music, Richard Strauss, impended as a sinister iconoclast; Debussy seemed an anarch, and Max Reger was anathema. While people were still raging about *Ibéria* and *La Mer* and denouncing the infamy of incessant Regerian modulations, they suddenly became aware that one Igor Stravinsky, they hardly knew how, had entered the picture and that even the refuge of the sempiternal spring was no longer safe from the desecrating ritual of consecration.

There were rumors of an Italian named Marinetti; Leo Ornstein, in these United States, earned the title of the one simon-pure "futurist" composer; atonality, polytonality, multiple rhythm came trooping along; Schoenberg dispensed his post-romantic *Schrecklichkeit*, and Alois Haba ardently espoused the cause of quarter-tones. Our old, wry world would have reached its gasping end ere this, if one fine day Stravinsky had not come out for Tchaikovsky, Schoenberg proclaimed his devotion to *Il Trovatore*, and various and sundry others taken to writing like Bach, (a quaint, endearing custom of the late Herr Reger, by the by.) So on swam our planet toward annihilation one more time deferred. Meanwhile R. Strauss had become an article of bourgeois respectability, Debussy had been adopted into that gracious and unoffending category which includes such dainty reverends as the Couperins, Rameau, and little sister Chaminade. And everybody begins wondering whether the real Stravinsky is not the last of the musical reactionaries—at least until the

essential Toryism of Herr Haba shall bewray itself in a stubborn stand before the ultimate ditch of the indivisible crotchet.

And what of the simon-purity of Leo Ornstein? The "futurist" future of that admirable pianist seems to lie safely behind him. Consequently our extreme lefters in the current musical radicalism of America may be set forth without undue trepidation as Carl Ruggles, Edgar Varèse, and Henry Cowell.

There is a robustness about Mr. Ruggles' talent and a kind of forthright determination which abash the scoffer and exact respect in the face of an obstinate aesthetic scepticism. His portrayal of such recognizable phenomena of nature as a mountain or a tree may be an achievement in obscurity, a masterpiece of apparent contradiction, a flawless example of what in less timorous days was flatly denominated ugliness. But unnecessary and beside the mark as it may seem to the uninitiated observer, he would be thrice rash who would question its sincere intention or deny that concealed within this lingo of seemingly unconstruable sound inheres a genuine, a definite idea. And when it is angels that Mr. Ruggles symphonically summons, for him they step off toward the doom of Lucifer amid an indignant uproar of six muted and rebellious trumpets, as proud as any exiled deity that ever marched before destruction. Moreover, Mr. Ruggles is an earnest and untiring student of rhythmic possibilities and the fastidious conduct of the melodic line.

The crown and sceptre of the left, however, the power that speaks to kindred power, and a big share of the glory, are vested in Edgar Varèse. And wherefore should they not be? Mr. Varèse enjoys the incalculable advantage of being recognized in high places, and we all know what recognition means, in art as in diplomacy. Compositions by Mr. Varèse have obtained the decisive distinction of performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra itself. No would-be detractor dare now dismiss their author as a faddist, a *fumiste*, a chapel-chief, a chronic aspirant to honors persistently withheld. Mr. Varèse has arrived.

It seems hardly necessary to point out that Mr. Varèse is fully alive to the value of the minor second, that he is versed in all the etiquette of each device that carries as prefix a "poly" or an alpha privative, that he is prepared to score for a bird-cage, an ash-can,

or a runcible carpet-sweeper, provided any one of those modest entities can make a desired contribution to his sonorous plan. In his *Amériques* he goes so far as to call to his aid a fire-engine's siren. Those who express horror at such impudence are doubtless unaware that Mozart was less daring when he established the outcast clarinet as a regular member of his symphonic band. And quite as if by accident Mr. Varèse, when he sees fit, drops unconcernedly into quarter-tones.

To the casual listener the inescapable facts of the Varèse brand of modernism are its instrumentation and its rhythm. His latest composition, *Arcanes*, (at the present writing not yet performed, but designated for the Philadelphia Orchestra), employs almost every conceivable implement and means of noise production short of Big Bertha and Erik Satie's typewriter.

Characteristic of this composer is his emphasis on percussion instruments. His *Hyperprism* (1922), which, like his *Amériques*, the Philadelphia Orchestra has performed, demands a percussion battery of sixteen. Strings are omitted, as they are from *Intégrales* (1924), a score which keeps four men busy at the pulsatiles. In *Amériques* (1921) one still finds the usual complement of strings, though even in this comparatively early work the composer supplements the full modern orchestra with a siren and extra percussion. However, *Amériques* is only an expression of the foreign-born composer still relatively new to America. Mr. Varèse's real American period has come subsequently.

The claim is made, and with eminent plausibility, that no explorer in the region of percussion has carried his researches quite so far as Mr. Varèse. But to dwell exclusively on that important point would be an injustice to his prowess as a rhythmist. One observes in his work an increasing emphasis on the rhythmic principle as distinct from the melodic. This procedure has no less honorable an antecedent than Beethoven's C minor symphony, whose animating germ is the initial rhythmic figure of an eighth note thrice uttered, followed by a half-note—in the first instance a major third lower than the tierce of eighths, but varying as to interval with the recurrence of the figure. In *Amériques* Mr. Varèse has by no means discontinued the use of definitely melodic themes, although a tendency to elim-

inate them is already discernible. In this respect his later scores register an "advance." But in spite of what some alarmists might infer, the composer insists that his most recent work of all, *Arcanes*, shall make its appeal as "pure music, sound for sound's sake, but disciplined."

It is easy to relate the music of Mr. Varèse to that modern movement in the visual arts which is represented by Matisse, Picasso (in what, for convenience, may be called his pre-Raphaelite days!), and Brancusi. And Mr. Varèse himself has authorized us to believe that his *Hyperprism* aims its facets hopefully toward the elusive desideratum of the Fourth Dimension. Lest any reader should here suspect a mystery as difficult to solve as the monadic Dyad of Xenocrates of Chalcedon, let me hasten to assure him that Mr. Varèse is as well aware as Mozart was that music, whatever it does, must sound. And the sonorous goal Mr. Varèse, like Mozart and unlike him, triumphantly attains!

Turning to Mr. Cowell, we meet with a singularly keen and limpid intelligence, an alert imagination, and that eerie strain of Celtic sorcery which is honestly his through his Irish provenance. It is some time since Mr. Cowell contributed his generous share toward the ascertaining of a long future for musical development by the promulgation of his engaging theory of tone-clusters. Mr. Cowell is also widely known as a pianist who can play the piano with his forearms and elbows as efficiently as he does with his fingers, and who, further, abandons the keys of the piano and plucks at its wiry viscera in his search for effects that neither the smitten ivories nor the strings of harp or lyre or psaltery or lute have sufficed to yield. For, along with Mr. Varèse, Mr. Cowell is an intrepid seeker after new sonorities.

There may be others of the atonal radicals as yet unheard, others awaiting a future recognition of their contemporaneity. But at the moment these three are the voices lifted highest out of the umbrageous and as yet unvaluated rumblings.

However one individually may react to the music of our composers of the extreme left, it is encouraging to know that three such doughty talents are sedulously laboring in the vineyard of the new, even though there still be those who stubbornly maintain that the left wing has no right.