

GEORGES AURIC—PEASANT OF PARIS

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Si je désire une eau d'Europe, c'est la flache,
Noire et froide où vers le crépuscule embaumé
Un enfant accroupi, plein de tristesse, lâche
Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai.

Rimbaud, *Bateau Ivre*.

.... jardins de mousse et de mica. Ils reflètent fidèlement les
vastes contrées sentimentales où se meuvent les rêves sauvages
des citadins.

Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*.

THE almost universal hostility that greets the art of Georges Auric is a measure of the extent to which nearly two centuries of symphonies, oratorios and music-dramas have burdened the minds of musicians. These centuries, despite their many cross-currents, have quite strictly confined the musician to certain dimensions for his work, to the choice of certain tones, to the expression of a particular spiritual message. Stravinsky's *Noces* and *Oedipus Rex*, Honegger's *Pacific 231*, sustain, even against the tide of contemporary music, an old conception of grandeur, of power, of emotionalism which Debussy and even more, Chabrier, sought to eliminate from their musical ideal. A writer of tragic music like Schubert often rid himself of these old associations by the simple joys of melodic repetition, the artless straying of his modulations—delightful tricks of doubling and trebling material hardly adequate to fill two or three measures. Even musicians who appear able to grasp the subtleties of the modern school or the Slavic and Negro violences, consider Auric hardly a musician because he has discarded those elements which in a Bach or a Beethoven typify the only essential qualities of music. They grant the title grudgingly and solely because he is neither painter nor author; but his originality, or at least his isolation,

his aloofness from so-called "modern" music lay him open to the danger of being dubbed a nonentity.

Auric's music serves to emphasize in others something which he alone possesses to any marked degree and to reveal in other arts an element that it has, strangely enough, in common with them. This is true even though his music lies outside the bounds that past masterpieces and customs have sanctified and its appreciation requires a freshness of taste which can withstand the influence of ancient grandeurs.

In the course of an aphorism Nietzsche described the work of Beethoven as a "music *about* music." Though Nietzsche meant to apply this phrase specifically, we may direct it to other musicians. The problem consists of grasping the relation—a new one each time—between common music and music raised to a higher degree, between the music which evokes and that which is evoked, and in penetrating the borderland of fantasy, of association, of poetry which lies between them. In other words, that which would lead us to define the complex meaning of poetry as it is understood musically. When Nietzsche speaks of a "music about music" he is thinking of the notes and rhythms Beethoven appropriated from the streets and the taverns, and that additional element which cannot be reduced to an exact musical technique but belongs to the order of musical suggestion. He is thinking of the evidence Beethoven found of a "better world," of those divine indications he gave us in this world of a music which would be music.

In Auric's work—similar in this sense to cubism—we find a constant play of allusions, mocking or tender, to the most humble music, to the commonplaces of the most conventional music, to everything within earthly confines that bears the brand of sentimentality, that may be the refuge of a sad and barren poetry, to all that, by a strange twist, is the expression of a lyricism, of a feeling which is, however, frustrated. Auric borrows from these sources and suggests them, somewhat as the cubist painter who plays with nature, putting a fragment of reality into a purely imaginative plastic mass or using this bit of reality as a starting point to evolve something which will have no relation to the original except assonance or that of a pun in pictures.



Malborough s'en va-t'en guerre, III, Le Chemin de tous
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Cinq poèmes de Gérard de Nerval, Une allée du Luxembourg
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To say that Auric is a pure musician would be misleading, although, as we see in the ballet *Les Matelots* and even better in the *Pastorale*, he does at times achieve pure music: here are pearls of extreme dissimilarity strung together into a strand of great strength. Wherever in the work of Wagner and Debussy the course would be determined in a poetic and musical parallel, in Auric the content and its divisions seem to be specially extra-musical and literary, and yet the whole attains a purely musical unity and the general effect, disregarding details, is that of a strictly musical structure. Thus from work to work, as much through a certain acquired fluency as through a growing refinement of writing, Auric has progressed to a style which, in his *Trois Caprices*, is so terse and sustained that it can no longer arouse any derivative suggestions.

His music is sufficiently contradictory to be considered as complex as the spirit of its creator. Music that is light and facile though difficult to create and just as difficult to understand—witness the numerous errors in critical judgments; music that is pleasing but whose delight is often morose; music that has the delicacy of a butterfly or of a reed flute and the inimitable shrillness of musical glasses.



Alphabet, Bateau
(Copyright by Max Eschig, Paris)

Contrast this with the enormous figure of a chubby young man who flings fat hands on the piano, strikes a few portentous, heavy basses and violent rhythms, and draws forth only some thin and scattered appoggiaturas, a synthetic arpeggio, some furtive sighs, an isolated and bucolic trill.



Malborough s'en va-t'en guerre, La toute de Malborough
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We must not forget the raised little finger, those graces of an elephant in corsets, the sidelong glances, the face once that of a precociously knowing child, now only that of a child; and the short-lived lyrical outbursts, the studied frenzies of which one can never say whether they have risen in irony or are shut off by it. All this not so much in the precious manner of a Laforgue but rather like a Chabrier of the race track, of the open spaces and the municipal square. In short this is music which is severe in its frivolity, and though but two steps removed from the circus and the music hall, it selects from them only austere subjects. For its levity it has as counterweight a concise expression and shows from the start that it adheres to a strict doctrine of linear purity.

This apparent facility which, as we have already said, is the result of a painstaking elaboration with all that it involves of struggle and victory, rests essentially on a folk-art method, comparable to the exploitation of a rhythm of the Habañera or the Viennese waltz rather than a systematic use of augmented seconds, syncopation, etc. Where others who have borrowed

from music of the faubourg or of the circus have allowed no suggestion of these sources to influence their choice of technical means, Auric tries to incorporate the minutest, least refined melodic, harmonic and instrumental characteristics of his models, to bring them together and to achieve unity even to the extent of creating forms which have a direct relation to the original. *Les Cinq Bagatelles* thus has all the succinctness and flavor (still foreign to "learned" music) of the music of popular singing societies and of the waltzes of the roadhouse. Although it is too poetic ever to figure in the repertoire of these latter it has at the same time a too light and graceful ease ever to be taken seriously by "musicians." On the other hand the ballet from the *Pastorale* is a model of balance maintained between the impromptu style of the melodies and the delicate polyphonic writing and lightness of the harmonies—not to mention the logic of the transitions, the melodic richness of its connecting ideas.

In the works we have been considering, in the comic opera *Sous le Masque* and the ballet, *Jardin Enchanté de la Fée Aleine*, and in some happy fragments more or less badly imbedded in his other productions, he seems to skim lightly over a music which may have a real existence somewhere and to which he seems to be referring. But he never reveals it to us as a whole and his constant pursuit of it produces a continuity of style binding together his slightest compositions, from *Gaspard et Zoé* and *Les Trois Interludes* of 1914 to the melodies based on Gérard de Nerval and de Banville, 1925-1927. Georges Auric, true "peasant of Paris," has made us recognize, through a triumph of style, in what was only an urban and hollow art, first, a picturesque and almost rural quality, then, perceptible through all the incidentals, a universal language which assures its admittance to the category of pure music.

Auric is one of the best examples of progress, of the only kind of progress which exists in art. Escaped from one of the most dangerous blind alleys in which a young musician was ever immured, he has finally arrived at a clarity and flexibility that are the result not of surrender but of an enlightened effort, bold and fruitful, such as is seldom found in any age. Here is a style which even in its simplicity or in its tinsel decorations, with its grating

chromaticism, its appoggiaturas more and more regularly resolved and its retarded passing notes, is one of the most personal in our knowledge.



Pastorale, Number II
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Formerly wandering off at tangents and in zigzag flights, it has gradually acquired a continuity of flow, first in rhythm, as in the opening scene of *Les Matelots*, then in melodic character, as in *La Pastorale*. The harmonic characteristics have developed from harshness, from the earlier monotonous tyranny of small explosions, to power and tenderness.

Critics have called the absolute melody toward which Auric has gradually turned a "reaction," but who today can escape this reproach? Was not the diatonism of Darius Milhaud the beginning of a reaction and yet did he not give us the *Etudes* for piano and orchestra? The reaction of Stravinsky after *Mavra* produced the extraordinary *Octuor* of which the fugato remains one of the boldest pages in modern harmony. As to Honegger, has he always pioneered since *Horace Victorieux*, which goes back to 1921? And is not the decisive stand taken by Auric inevitable—namely to preserve the melodic element in music, which though never indeed endangered by Stravinsky is denied by "modern music" as a whole? Auric belongs to those of whom Nietzsche speaks in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "It is not that they wish to turn back, it is rather that they wish to go away."