

PARIS THAWS OUT TO MUSIC

Paris, March 15, 1945

DEAR Miss L.

The coldest Paris winter of the war is past. The breath of the dancers does not hang in plumes above the stage, as it did. The night Lt. Edward Kilenyi played the *Emperor Concerto* with the Colonne orchestra, all the musicians except Kilenyi wore overcoats. The house was crowded. He had to keep his hands in his pockets to keep them warm during the long introduction by the orchestra.

During the winter, not many concerts had vacant seats. The Orchestre des Concerts de la Conservatoire continued its public rehearsal under Münch on Saturday mornings and its concerts on Sunday afternoons. There was a Stravinsky festival arranged by Radiodiffusion Française. Auric wore a red vest to keep warm.

At first, many *boîtes* were open, but when dancing was forbidden, most of them closed down. Mady Breton, an extremely innocent looking blonde girl, sang at Suzy Solidor's amid the hundred portraits of Suzy. She sang *Si tu savais* by someone named Georges Ulmer, a song published in Perpignan which is exactly the right thing for Frank Sinatra, and French folk songs, and two character songs of the peculiar type in which there is a narrative, followed by a refrain, followed by a patter epilogue. One of these was about a Chinese girl and her lute, and the other about a man who had won a girl with a ukulele, and she was delectable. The can-can at the Moulin Rouge remained substantially unchanged, although a man who said he knew, observed that the naked ladies posed on life-sized models of rearing horses were now unhappily all French, whereas such work was formerly the specialty of Middle Europeans.

With the coming of the warmer weather, the clandestine concert has emerged as a new phenomenon. Chamber groups which played in public while the Germans were here now play in private houses lent them for the occasion, and one has to know the owner of the house in order to obtain a ticket.

At the Salle Gaveau on January 31, the Société Privée de Musique de Chambre gave its first concert, with music from the *Alceste* of Lully and Purcell's *Dioclesian* or the *Prophetess*. The Purcell music included a wildly exciting Trumpet Tune, Air and Chorus, with the trumpet, very high, in dialogue with the tenor soloist. The program cover by Bérard was done with an economy of line and an elegance unapproached in concert programs I have known. Despite the loyalty and even heroism of audiences and artists, the standard of performance on the whole was low, as might be expected when often the musicians were hungry and their hands were blue with cold.

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During the winter, I had one unforgettable musical experience. At the gracious suggestion of Marie Laurencin, the Count and Countess Etienne de Beaumont, who still care about good new work, arranged for me to hear Olivier Messiaen and a pupil of his play his long composition for two pianos, *Les Visions de l'Amen*. The performance took place in a flat in Montmartre. As usual, it was piercingly cold. From time to time, the hostess entered with a tiny hot water bottle of silver that looked like a large watch, and offered it mutely to Messiaen, who shook his head and began the next movement.

This work enriches the repertoire for two pianos, which is not too rich, more than any other work of our time that I have heard. It has been years since I have had the opportunity to view a landscape in music which was wholly new to me. I know of only one other two-piano work which seems of equal importance, and that is the Brahms *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*.

Messiaen was born December 10, 1908, in Avignon, which remembers the popes. He began to compose when seven years old. At the Conservatoire, he won first prize in accompaniment, piano, counterpoint and fugue, history of music, organ and improvisation, and finally in composition. He was named organist of la Trinité in 1931, and in 1936, with André Jolivet, Daniel Lesur and Yves Baudrier, founded the group "Jeune France." Since April, 1941, he has been professor of harmony at the Conservatoire.

He has worked with plain-chant and with Hindu rhythms, and is enamored of quarter-tones and the songs of birds. He is above all a Catholic musician. He writes of his own musical language with words

partly of his own invention. His recent works include *Les Corps Glorieux* for organ (1939), *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* for violin, clarinet, cello and piano (written while he was a prisoner of war in 1940-41), *Les Visions de l'Amen* (1943), *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* for choir of women's voices, celesta, vibraphone, onde Martinot (whatever that is), piano, battery and string orchestra (1944) and *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* for piano alone (1944), which takes two evenings to perform, and which I hope to hear.

Les Visions de l'Amen is full of the music of bells, mellow bells and cracked harsh bells like those of Rennes, near bells and distant bells, deep bells and high and delicate bells, and there is no trace of monotony in the music. The sections are, Amen of the Creation; Amen of the stars, of the planet Saturn; Amen of the Agony of Jesus; Amen of Desire; Amen of the angels, of the saints, of the song of the birds; Amen of the Judgment; Amen of the Consummation. Each section is preceded by a quotation in the manuscript (such a work may not be printed here soon). The first section of this grand and dramatic sevenfold Amen bears the quotation "Let there be light. And there was light." The Amen of the stars quotes Baruch: "God calls them and they say, 'Amen, we are here!'" It is a savage dance. The final movement is headed "De clarté en clarté."

The two sections which remain most acute to me are the one about the angels and the birds, with a long, serene melody decorated by the most intricate fretwork, and the one about the judgment, in which futile supplications are broken by great frozen chords like pronouncements from the throne of God.

I think that this is great music. It is too bad that very few two-piano teams can play it, because it is a work of tremendous difficulties. However, it seems to me that they will have to play it, so the sooner it is published and the sooner duo-pianists get to work on it, the better.

Davidson Taylor