

## IGOR MARKEVITCH

### Little Rollo in Big Time

VIRGIL THOMSON

MARKEVITCH'S first concert at the Théâtre Pigalle in May of 1930 was a most elegant occasion. From the seclusion of the Place de la Madeleine, Jean Cocteau had sent forth the usual *mot d'ordre* with the equally usual *billets de faveur*.

I say the usual *mot d'ordre*, but it was really something more than the ordinary command to read a book or to look at somebody's pictures. There was a sort of formal intimacy everywhere in speaking of the coming concert that made the preparation for it resemble more the plans for a family event, say a wedding or a christening or a first communion, than any merely commercial *début*. Perhaps one half expected that before the evening was over we would all be given boxes of *dragées* to take home with the name of little Igor painted on the toys in blue.

It was obvious, in any case, that no expense was being neglected which might help to make the occasion worthy of the best traditions of mundane entertainment. It was also obvious the Everybody would be there, including Godfather Jean, and that Everybody would be quite dressed up. To have refused to wear one's best would have amounted to an antagonistic demonstration, as if one pretended that one were only going to a concert.

Of course there was a concert too; that is to say that music was played, lots of music, good music, including a piece by little Igor, whose remarkable talent, correctly disciplined by music-lessons from Nadia Boulanger and Paul Dukas, inspired by the friendship and illuminated by the counsels of *Le Poète Lui-Même*, was displayed most effectively before the assembled friends and family and before a choice and discriminating but well-prepared public.

When the pears of the Luxembourg garden, grown on espaliered trees and ripened in envelopes, are judged by the wise old

gardener to be ready for the presidential table, the presidential mouth may legitimately be supposed to water. Even if one doesn't care for early pears in the form of a *Cantate* for soprano, male choir and orchestra by the young prodigy, Satie's *Mercur*e is a savory partridge and a ballet by Rameau a smooth and fruity old wine for the connoisseurs. Besides, Satie is a flag. For any who might have been tempted to disdain Cocteau's invitation, the presence on the program of one of the Counselor of Arceuil's major works, rarely enough heard these troublous times, firmly forbade faint-heartedness.

It was a lordly gathering of the clans. Everbody turned out from the most aged Princesse to the youngest Tail-Coat. The heroic and battered Old Guard of 1920 turned out to a man, to a woman, every hide and every hair, turned out as they had not turned out since Satie's death, or to be more exact, since the Comte de Beaumont gave his *Soirées de Paris* (and the première of *Mercur*e) at the Cigale in 1924. Désormière conducted. The new Théâtre Pigalle, looking like something between a frigidaire and a humidor, set off to perfection the also-then-new long dresses. Madame Madeleine Vhita of the Opéra sang quite well in a most becoming white satin. And as I said before, it was indeed an elegant occasion.

What about little Igor's music? says my impatient reader.

Quite equal to the occasion, say I, and very good. A bit self-assertive perhaps and harsh like the taste of a slightly unripe pear (they must be picked a little green) but full of savor and with a kind of violent charm. Obviously a first-water talent. Everybody saw that. The public was well disposed and all the friends were pleased and the family was very, very happy.

Since that time the following works by our eager little Igor have been performed, some published, even; and his rising reputation crowned with one first class triumph.

*Concerto* for piano and orchestra

*Concerto Grosso* for orchestra

*Sérénade* for violin, clarinet and bassoon

*Rébus*, ballet for orchestra

*Partita* for piano and small orchestra

*Galop* for piano and wind instruments

The piano-concerto, written for Diaghilev, who was incidentally the real discoverer of Markevitch, is an earlier work than the *Cantate* and is universally deplored in the light of his later achievements.

The *Concerto Grosso* is a work of some power, like the *Cantate*, and has many sincere admirers. It was conducted by Désormière at the Old Conservatory in a concert organized, like the first, by Markevitch himself and honored once more by the Sacred Presence of J. Cocteau. This time comparison was invited with a Haydn symphony, with a short ballet-piece by Sauguet called *La Nuit*, and with Stravinsky's *Renard*.

The *Sérénade* was performed in 1931 at the first concert of the chamber-music society of that name. It was not a success. It is commonly esteemed to be an unsatisfactory work. I personally found it most agreeable. The dryness of his manner seemed to me more happily married to the dry sonority of that combination than to the richer stridencies of orchestral brass.

*Rébus*, given at another privately organized concert, but this time with the players of the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris and at the entirely professional Salle Gaveau, was a courageous gesture of shooting-the-works. The program offered Markevitch's ballet in the company of the most celebrated music of our century. Two Bach *Chorales* orchestrated by Schönberg, Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* and Satie's *Parade*. To complete the test of musicianship, he conducted his own piece and did it extremely well.

*Rébus* is a better piece than the earlier ones. The same power of continuity is there, and he has learned to vary the texture some. The monotonous and really quite dull academic counterpointing of the *Concerto Grosso* and the *Sérénade* is here relieved by a greater orchestral diversity, by more thematic liberty and, most especially, by rests. There is air in the cake.

Thanks to Cocteau and also thanks to his own talent, which is after all perfectly evident to anybody, Markevitch was by this time quite well enough launched to dispense with the sharing of his glories by those who had launched him. Lest this sentence be taken to suggest ingratitude, I hasten to remind that a young man can have a quite right desire to stand on his

own legs. However that may be, our young stripling's relations with J. C. were not entirely satisfactory at the time of this concert. There had been positively Byzantine disputes about the orthodoxy of the Diaghilev tradition as professed by the various inheritors of it. It was decided that Cocteau could no longer approve publicly of Igor in all his works, more particularly the *Rébus*, which had been conceived (although never actually executed) as a ballet by Massine. So the Sacred Presence once more displaced itself to appear in a stage box and to reply to the young composer's bow in his direction with an unsmiling face and a repeated horizontal movement of the arm, index finger upward in ceremonial reprimand. Active chick and disapproving hen.

Now we come to the *Partita*. Our hero has cut the Gordian apron-strings. He has a publisher. He has been compared in the public prints to the lowest forms of animal and artistic life. Also to Michelangelo and Einstein. It is difficult to see what common basis of comparison is possible among the works of respectively a composer, a painter-sculptor-poet, and a mathematician, unless it be the publicity values of their variously celebrated names. However, he is now a famous composer, and the final judge in Paris of all musical talent, the Princesse Edmond de Polignac, née Winnaretta Singer, has ordered a piece.

The *Partita*, performed by Marcelle Meyer and orchestra (Désormière conducting as usual), first at the house in the Avenue Henri Martin, then at a public *Sérénade*, leaves no doubt in anybody's mind. This is big-time success. There is no question of elegance or novelty or maneuvering or sentiment or follow-the-leader. A heterogeneous audience at an otherwise dull concert makes a spontaneous ovation. The piece is a wow. It pleases all degrees of intelligence from the sublime to the ridiculous. Little is left to be said.

The *Galop*, written for the Vicomte de Noailles's concert at Hyères, is a successful *tour de force* by a composer who is now a master of his trade and of his public.

I am asked to write about Markevitch's music and I write about nothing but his career. I have tried to turn this article into more serious channels, but it repeatedly gets the better of

me. The truth is that the career is more interesting than the music.

The case of Markevitch is not dissimilar to the case of Antheil. Fragile and violent children, launched on a rough but friendly world by Cocteau and Pound, those past-masters of poetic publicity, they have power, these children, the power of megalomania, and some genius. Their force lies in their maniacal concentration on the mastery of one particular effect, rather the same effect in the two cases, as a matter of fact. Their weakness lies in the confusion which exists in their own minds between their music and their public lives. Hence, all goes well as long as success is expanding. The slightest check and they lose their confidence. Antheil was not able to see that the Carnegie Hall *fiasco* of several years back was not a musical failure at all. It was merely the inevitable collapse of an overblown publicity-bubble. But everybody liked the music.

Everybody likes Markevitch's music. It is skillful and pleasing and devoid of all human sentiment. The composer of it, like Antheil, has learned from Stravinsky that one makes a bigger effect on the public by writing to the public than one does by writing to God. They learned it from Stravinsky, because Stravinsky is the popular master of their generation. In another generation they would have learned it from Puccini or, as Stravinsky did himself, from Rimsky-Korsakov.

Markevitch's language, like Antheil's and like Stravinsky's, is strictly tonal and strictly dissonant. It is also strictly and incessantly contrapuntal. He lacks Antheil's harmonic relief. His thematic material is, I think, somewhat superior. In both cases there is insistent rhythm, and in both cases the instrumentation is effective, though that is a pretty banal compliment in this day when every school-boy who has a little ear for it can do the same. It sounds well and makes a good noise. That is something, though there is not so far any radical readjustment of orchestral timbres.

I wanted to bring Russia into this discussion but I don't seem to find any connection, excepting maybe the weakness of the French for Slavic charm. But that quite gets me on to the career again, and I am sure we have all heard quite enough about that.