

FRENCH LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES

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THE musical monuments of France, ancient and modern, are all the same monuments, but the landscape around them has changed.

For one thing, the French have become a singing people again after a hundred and fifty years of not being one. It's like this. The law that guarantees two weeks a year of paid vacation to all salaried employees (it is one of the famous Social Laws voted in 1936 by the first Blum government and includes industrial workers) has set the whole population of France to traveling around its own country. Also the forty-hour week (where still applied, which is in most of the non-military industries) makes the two-day week-end quite general. Hence the extremely low week-end railway-fares, which, when combined with low country prices make leaving town as cheap as staying home, thus keeping a considerable part of the French population constantly moving around even in winter.

That means that about ninety-five per cent of the tourist business is French, but not rich French. So prices have to be reasonable. (Provincial prices are almost exactly the same, in francs, as in 1925.) And French standards about how beds should be made and food should be cooked must be observed. No longer can Americans push up prices just for the fun of it or English ruin the cooking by demanding that everything be boiled in plain water and served without seasoning. And so we have pre-war standards of eating and housekeeping plus all the post-war standards of ventilation and sport facilities. There is local fare in peasant pubs. There is *grande cuisine* in court-house towns at twenty-six francs a head. And by *grande cuisine* I mean *la grande cuisine française*, not Swiss hotel-cooking. I mean foie gras and blue trout and Bresse chickens in yellow cream and

morille mushrooms and crayfish and wild pheasant and venison with chestnut purée and ice cream of wild strawberries or of pistache custard and cakes made only of almond-flour and sweet butter and honey and nothing ever boiled in anything but wine or meat-juice.

And there are sports and climates for all predilections. Sexually ambitious young office-workers usually go to Cannes or Deauville. Deauville is better for girls. Cannes amuses the boys more. They dance with Marlene Dietrich. This seems to constitute a sort of Diploma in Social Graces. Some even get to expensive Saint Tropez, which specializes in literary night-life for the yachting-world. The snootiest resorts are not without their fringe or invasion of *vacances payées*, snobbish term for *petits-bourgeois* vacationists. Thousands of families complete with tent, canvas wash-basin and a folding stove, practise *le camping*. Humble sport-lovers by tens of thousands travel in pairs on tandem bicycles, he in front, she behind, in cycling outfits of identical tweed. Unattached youth goes hob-nailing in bands and sleeps in Youth Hostels (created two years ago by the now defunct Ministry of Leisure). There are two chains of these *Auberges de la Jeunesse*, one organized by the (now also defunct) Popular Front, the other by more right-and-centrist political elements. Most trampers subscribe to both. The hostels are very cheap indeed, clean and comfortable.



This is the point at which singing comes in. Depression-alcoholism being out of fashion, and the promiscuous love-making of the 1920's even more so, the big family-party that France has become now amuses itself in the good old French way by drinking wine, telling stories and singing songs. They dance too, round dances in peasant styles. The Lambeth Walk, England's first contribution to popular dancing in over three hundred years, is used as a get-together for fashionable gatherings. But mostly they sing the fine old French songs, nursery rhymes, sea chanties, tragic ballads, ribald medievalries, and always, if the company is anywhere to left of political center, the great revolutionary songs, the *Grakoviennne*, the *Carmagnole* and the *Ca Ira*. On the road they sing, in restaurants, in railway-carriages, in boats, bars

and *bordels*. Always in solo or unison, practically never in harmony. Never either do they vocalize. They sing the French language as *she is spoke*, thin, a little throaty, accurate in vowel and pitch, never muffling a consonant. But a few sprightly vocal teams make up their own topical songs and pay their summer expenses *à la troubadour*.

So far I have not perceived in all this anything that smells of mass-singing-under-a-leader nor any imitation of the choral-society concert-style. It is social music in the same sense that round dancing is social dancing. It is not a performance. If one wants a choral-society performance, there are two tip-top touring outfits, *Les Chanteurs de Lyon*, a large mixed choir, and *La Manécanterie de Petits Chanteurs de la Croix de Bois*, a boy choir not unlike Vienna's *Sängerknaben*. But those are another story.

A further difference in the French musical landscape is due to the inflow of Spanish and Catalan refugees. They play instruments on the streets, many of them, under windows for pennies. They are quite surprising to hear. They play all the right notes and their rhythm is exact.

Less pleasant, for some reason, is the prevalence of women's orchestras in the big provincial cafés. I presume women are cheaper than men. Certainly they try harder to please and they are technically more exact than the spiritless and incompetent *premiers prix du conservatoire* we used to have everywhere. Their marksmanship is good, their rhythm enthusiastic. The general style of playing is probably considered to be "dynamic." Certainly it is rather violent. Each piece ends with a big vaudeville flourish. All pretty tiresome. Besides which, the sight of a woman playing kettledrums with too much conviction is not only musically absurd but sexually comic also.



So much for the landscape. As for the monuments, nothing has changed at all. Messien is spoken of as a coming-man. Françaix is arrived. Markevitch conducts some in Italy and in England. He lives in Switzerland. He is frequently spoken of by both friends and enemies but his works are rarely mentioned by either.

I gather from film-fans that the French cinema is world-tops today esthetically. Also that German refugee technicians are not for nothing in that triumph. The musical scores, as formerly, are all by Honegger and Milhaud and Françaix. They are mostly neat and tasteful.

The theatre-music around Paris is practically all by Milhaud. It is mostly routine stuff. In Anouilh's *Bal des Voleurs* he did depart from the tiresome, gramophone-recorded formula and write his cues for a live musician (one only, doubling on flute and saxophone). *Le Corsaire*, now en route for New York, has a recorded score by Rieti.

Of the modern music societies, *Le Triton* announces continuance. *La Sérénade*, the only concert-giving society in the world that made a substantial effort at representing its epoch during the depression-decade, is probably dead; though no one connected with it seems to be quite sure.

The season's major novelty so far announced is Sauguet's *Chartreuse de Parme* at the Opéra, with sets by the young painter Jaques Dupont and a bang-up cast headed by Germaine Lubin. I know the work and esteem it highly. Its theatre-esthetic is taken directly from Verdi and Gounod. Its vocal line is fluid and lyrical. Instrumentally it is neo-Romantic, which also means fluid and lyrical. It has good numbers, effective theatrical situations and the finest French workmanship. It should be a success like *Faust* and *Carmen*. Maybe not the first time. Neither *Faust* nor *Carmen* was. But certainly eventually. Because France is longing for a really French opera again and *La Chartreuse* is exactly that.

It is astonishing how very French France has become. Not chauvinistic, God wot, or xenophobe. On the contrary, both Left and Right are international-minded as I have never seen them before. I mean just plain French in character, as Germans are German and the British, Oh, so British. Now the French love their language and they love the theatre and since singing is always the intensest form of language, and the singing theatre the intensest form of theatre, the French opera is always much closer to the hearts of Frenchmen than the Théâtre Français or even the movies. They would be awfully happy to have another

Manon. Massenet's *Manon* has had around two thousand performances at the Opéra Comique alone. Wishy-washy *Werther* recently reached its thousandth there. As for *Carmen*, its creator, the octogenarian Madam Emma Calvé, recently attended the two thousand two hundred and seventy-first performance by the troupe of the Comique (moved over to the Opéra for the occasion) as the President of the Republic's guest.

This last was part of the Bizet Centenary that has been going on for a month. The other Bizet theatrical evening (this one at the Comique) consists of the early opera, *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, and the late ballet, *Djamileh*. An orchestral concert about completes the repertory. It consists of the *Patrie* overture; a youthful symphony, *Les Jeux d'Enfants* and some songs. The Odéon of course performs *L'Arlésienne* with the music. There isn't much else. He died at thirty-six.



Some recent Anglo-German political manoeuvres, in the course of which a large part of the French army got mobilized (hence jokingly referred to here as "the War"), delayed the concert season by about a week. The "Peace" has just been celebrated by a series of *Tristan* performances at the Opéra in German with New York's Mme. Flagstad as the main card, and by a complete performance in two evenings at Saint Eustache of the Bach *Matthäuspasion* with the whole troupe from Leipzig's Thomasschule, including chorus, soloists and conductor. For some reason not clear to all, the boy-choir was in sailor-costume. . . From Spain the *Cobla Catalunya*, a ten-piece wind-orchestra, comes visiting periodically, playing in small political halls. Music and execution are superb. Ditto for the Basque National Dancers. . . . Nadia Boulanger's Morning Musicales at the Hotel Georges V have begun with a Monteverdi program. The audience is chiefly female and super-fashionable.

I am in receipt of some songs from the Communist-run *Editions Sociales Internationales*. They are entitled *Les Chants du Campéur* and the words are mostly by Paul Vaillant-Couturier, deceased Communist deputy. The composers represented are Shostakovitch, Eisler, Cliquet-Pleyel, Honegger, Yvonne Desportes and Georges Auric. The songs are all good, quite good.

... The concerts of medieval music in the Sainte Chapelle have started again with a fifteenth century mass on *L'Homme Armé*. ... Every now and then some incidental noise effects heard on the radio are more entertaining than the whole Columbia Workshop. ... The musical parts, about an hour in all, of Grace Moore's *Louise* film are completed. The musical directors are happy about them. ... The tastiest organ-improvisation in Paris is Tournemire at Sainte Clothilde. ... I learn from Chicago's admirable and informative musical magazine *Down Beat* that the best swing-outfit here is the quintet from the Hot-Club de France playing at the stylish night-club Bagatelle. Local specialists confirm this information. ... The new music-hall singer Charles Trenet is not quite like anything at home or in France either. He writes his own songs, as Georgius does, but they are simpler. No verbal acrobatics, no satire. Just a great freshness of tune and some surprisingly poetic poetry. Subjects tend toward the pastorale.

The Théâtre Français performs (with live musicians) considerable amounts of new incidental music for Racine, Corneille, and de Musset. It is usually by Milhaud, Honegger, or Françaix, occasionally Rieti. It is invariably adequate and tasty. One might call the manner of it sumptuous but secondary, like petit point upholstery on dining-room chairs. The whole presentation-system at the Français is rather like that under the Edouard Bourdet regime. That is to say that everything incidental, music and settings and costumes and even stage direction, is the work of France's finest, but it is always strictly secondary to elocution, which is after all the real specialty of the house. Not a bad specialty either for a house whose repertory is ninety per cent poetry. Because there isn't much seriously to be done about stage-poetry in the long run except to speak it with such resources of emphasis and expression as the human speaking voice is capable of. And elocution is the art of doing just that.