

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

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VIRGIL THOMSON

*April 18*

DEAR M. L.:

It's been a long cold winter and on the whole one of the nicest I've ever spent, although I am not one that cares much as a rule for snow and ice.

One of the delights of this pleasant city has always been its poverty of music. Not concert music and opera; we have more of those than New York has; but music-in-the-air, I mean, that ambience of musical noises, the sound of gramophones and radios, of vocalists at practise and of pianists at play, not to speak of junior's ineluctable assiduity on the saxophone, that makes residence in any American city predominantly an auditory experience. Italy is noisy with music like America, only the pitch is higher; and the sound of an Italian village in the evening can be pretty beautiful sometimes, especially if each of the five or six cafés has an outdoor loud-speaker to blend the bleatings of infants and of tenors into a sumptuous tutti that quite puts to shame any timidly insistent nightingale that may be needing to voice its libido in a garden at the same time.

Well, this year not only have the lights been dimmed in the Ville-Lumière (and very prettily too), but sound has been reduced to present needs. Street-singers have disappeared; buses disappear after nine o'clock at night; even in the day they are fewer. After midnight, when the cafés close, there is literally no noise anywhere except for a few taxis and private cars bringing private people home from private gatherings. One never

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\*Mr. Thomson's letter arrived only a few days before the fateful tenth of May which ended the eight months' "peace" described here.

hears a radio through a window any more; I think that the strict application of the regulations about not letting light filter through curtains and shutters make everybody unconsciously more careful about noise, though there are no regulations on the subject any different from those already in force. (Imposing your radio on the neighbors has for some years been frowned on by the law.)

Anyway, Paris, which has always been, compared to New York or to anything Italian, a quiet city (only London, which is lonesome, as Paris distinctly is not, can be more tomb-like at night) has become even more reposeful to the ear than it was. One almost wishes for a little roar sometimes, so pleasantly suburban have our lives become.

Of course, in peace-times, (a silly word that, because never have I passed such a peaceful time as these first eight months . . .) just as Paris was the one musical capital where one didn't have to hear any music one didn't want to hear, it was also the best place there was for hearing practically any music old or new that one did want to hear. The latter charm has disappeared. One does not hear any new music; there isn't any. There are a few modern concerts, of course; the Triton puts on a show occasionally; the subventioned orchestras play their minimum legal number of minutes per year of first auditions of French work. The radio tootles its way through many a trio too for wind instruments in *ye moderne style*. There is plenty of all that and innumerable festivals of Ravel. But still there isn't much that could be classified as musically news.

Perhaps I had better say just what there is, beginning with the radio. The British radio is occupied entirely with cheery numbers of a music-hall nature meant for soldiers and with comforting political speeches for the home-folks. The French radio does plays, modernistic chamber-music, classics from discs, and political propaganda in foreign languages. Never have I heard so much German on the air. The two Paris operas and the symphony concerts are broadcast regularly also. Germany gives us, in addition to the famous and completely charming Lord Haw-Haw (in English), symphony concerts (largely Wagner) and excellent American jazz. The best radio jazz in Europe always did come, I don't know why, from Florence and from Berlin. Since the stations of Danzig, Warsaw, and Katowice were taken over by the Germans, they have been putting out the same massive orchestral programs as Berlin and Hamburg and the same excellent American jazz, all with added kilowatts. Prague does not seem to have been incorporated into that particular chain. Its programs, less

massive and less jazzy, continue to send out the Czechish Opera and to indulge the Czechish taste for string quartets. The Rhineland stations do quartets too and a good deal of Mozart and Haydn. Vienna is mostly waltzy now and Budapest Hungarian-dancy. Algeria and Morocco play native-style music too. Spain not; from there one gets little beyond politics and church services. And Spanish church music would seem to rest content on the Bostonian Catholic level where it has reposed for some years already. The Belgian stations have picked up a little, but on the whole their public seems to prefer light music of the Delibes sort and dance-music that is definitely "sweet." Holland and Switzerland hold the fort for Sebastian Bach and for the oratorio-style. Italy, in addition to the Florentine jazz I mentioned above, and to some quite decent news broadcasts in various languages, has been doing super-first-class opera. Most of the good Italian singers being at home this year, because their government is as skittish as ours is about giving out passports, the operas in both Rome and Milan have been brilliant as to execution. I heard a *Trovatore* one night that revealed a degree of expressive variety and of theatrical power I didn't know was in the old thing. The roles were sung by Maria Caniglia and Cloe Elmo and Gigli and Valentino. Marinuzzi conducted, and I assure you the orchestra "talked." I also heard, superbly rendered, Pizzetti's *Fedra*. It is quite a fine number. It is *Pelléas et Mélisande* keyed up (or down, as you like) to the melodramatic intensity of *La Tosca*. I doubt if it will change any composer's life much, but it is certainly a fine big number. My radio doesn't get Moscow very well or Helsinki or Athlone, but when it does the programs seem to be mostly routine stuff one knows and the performances in no way extraordinary. I might close the subject of radio by mentioning that last summer, when I was in Italy, the young people used to sit around pretty sadly till eleven o'clock, when the Juan-les-Pins station began its international hour of popular music, and that even they sat quietly enough through a certain amount of Spanish tangos and French javas and the inevitable *Santa Lucia* (the hour's theme-song) for the satisfaction of hearing real American music, by which they mean Duke Ellington and Bob Crosby et al. If you could see the faces light up when that comes on, you would understand why America, with immigration to it virtually stopped by both their government and ours, still represents to the youth of Italy a dream-country, although instead of its being the Country of Business Opportunity it once was, it has become now The Land of Beautiful Music. They don't call that music jazz or swing or any-

thing special; they call it *la musica americana*. And their hats are off to it.

To return to Paris and to what we have here. The orchestral concerts are very much what they always were (except for one orchestra less) and they all play to full houses at the same time, which is Sundays at a quarter to six. There are Polish and Finnish benefits at other times. The Polish programs seem to concentrate on Chopin, not a semi-quaver of Szymanowski or of his school. The Finnish ones make a little gesture about Sibelius, a tiny little gesture, you know, nothing graver than *Finlandia* and a few songs. I fancy it is considered that the playing of a whole symphony might conceivably alienate Parisian sympathies.

Wagner has been played, and all went off fine. Three pieces were announced for the end of a regular Sunday, though later two of these were removed, as presumably the playing of the first would provoke such a demonstration that the others couldn't be got through. Demonstration there was, indeed, all for Mr. Wagner. When the conductor (it was Paul Paray) first appeared there was a tumult of angry protest demanding why he had cut out two of the numbers. So he made a speech that didn't make much sense, as it had evidently been prepared in view of an anti-German demonstration, about how he had been a soldier in the other war and that culture knows no frontiers. Applause and loud cheers from all and some grumbling from the Wagner aficionados, who still wanted their three pieces. They didn't get them; but the *Tannhauser* overture they did get was cheered for a quarter of an hour. All that was two months or more ago; I haven't heard of any Wagner being played since.

The opera repertories are much as always, except for Wagner, although works that require lots of scene-shifting are avoided, because the stage-hands are mostly mobilized.

Alfred Bruneau's *Le Rêve* has been revived. I haven't seen it; Garden tells me it is Bruneau's best work and that the American baritone Andréze is superb in it. I did see Xavier Leroux's *Le Chémineau* for the first time in nearly thirty years (the French Opera of New Orleans used to give it) and was delighted. It has a good libretto by Jean Richepin; it is admirably written for voices and sonorously orchestrated. Its musical material is honest and direct. There are tender passages and great climaxes and from beginning to end less folderol and musical chi-chi than I've practically ever heard in my life. It is music that is both competent and sincere. Such music is shockingly rare in this age of our art's decline. Hearing it gave me seriously to reflect whether any effort toward sincerity, the kind of terrific

and humane sincerity that makes Molière Molière, for example, has ever been systematically exerted in music. Maybe a little by Sebastian Bach and by Schumann and a very little by Brahms. Practically everybody else has had his eye on a different ball, either the sharpness of auditive effect or the force of personal projection, or the sensuality of mystic contemplation, not to speak of the celebration of traditional rites, theatrical and religious. I have no conclusions to offer on the subject; I merely note that Leroux's *Le Chémineau* provoked that bit of meditation one Sunday afternoon.

Honegger's *Jeanne au Bucher* for orchestra, chorus, soloists, and Ida Rubinstein (isn't the text by Claudel? I think it is) I missed last June and again of late here. Music-lovers consider it a most impressive work. In Brussels recently its performance provoked a francophile demonstration, although Honegger is, I believe, technically Swiss.

The Milhaud *Medea* goes on being announced and postponed year after year. A part of it was given (successfully, I believe) last spring in Flemish at the Antwerp Opera. Flemish Antwerp has been for several years now Europe's Hartford.

There is stage-music by Sauguet with Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, now playing to good houses. Haven't been. There are no new movies, French movie-production being, ever since September, at a complete standstill.

### III

I fancy my account of these little matters doesn't make very clear why I have enjoyed my winter so much. I'm not sure I know exactly. I've tried to tell you what it's like here musically; for other matters there are plenty of reports in the weekly press. What I can't describe very well is the state of calm that permeates our whole intellectual life. Not the vegetable calm of a back-water country or the relative and quite electric calm that is supposed to exist at the centre of a moving storm. Rather it is the quietude of those from whom have been lifted all the burdens and all the pressures, all the white elephants and all the fears that have sat on us like a nightmare for fifteen years. I am not referring to any imminence of German invasion or of its contrary. I am talking about that imminence of general European cultural collapse that has been hanging over us ever since the last war ended. As long as the tension was mounting everybody was unhappy. Fascism in Italy, the Jewish persecutions in Germany, the Civil War in Spain, a hundred other scenes of the heart-breaking drama have kept us jittery and trembling. It has been imagined and hoped that possibly some of the



brighter boys might stop the progress of it all by taking thought. Our opinions were demanded on every imaginable variety of incident in power politics and in class warfare, whether we had any access or not to correct information about such incidents (which we usually didn't) or any degree of political education that would make our opinions worth a damn, even if we had had access to the facts of life. For ten years now all sides have been pressing us to talk; indeed many have talked, and I should say that in consequence a great deal less real work got done in those years than was done in the preceding decade.

That's all over now. We are on the chute. And in spite of the enormous inroads on a man's time and money that being mobilized represents, and in spite of the strictness of both military and political leadership over all sorts of intellectual operations, the intellectual life has picked up distinctly. The lotus-land of whether surrealism is really gratuitous and whether such and such a picture by Picasso is really worth the price asked (for, dear Reader, it was indeed by becoming passionate over such matters that many fled the impossibility of being anything beyond merely passionate over matters like Jewry and Spain, because they knew that mere passion wouldn't get anybody anywhere and that passion was all anybody had to offer on any side, excepting maybe a little a quiet opportunism in England and in Russia), anyway, the 1930's, that stormy lotus-land of commercialized high esthetics to which New York's Museum of Modern Art will long remain a monument, have quietly passed away. It is rather surprising and infinitely agreeable to find that poets now are writing poetry again rather than rhymes about current events; that painters paint objects, not ideas; that composers write music to please themselves, there being no longer any Modern Music Concert committees to please. Most surprising and agreeable of all is the fact that the young (with so many of their elders away now and with all their elders' pet ideas very definitely on the shelf) have again become visible as young. They are doing all the things they haven't been allowed to do for some time, such as talking loud in cafés and sleeping with people of their own age. Also, instead of discussing esthetics with intelligence and politics with passion, as their elders did for so long, they are discussing esthetics with passion and politics with intelligence. I find the change a happy one indeed. I also find distinctly agreeable the presence around of young poets and young painters who look us squarely in the eye and say "hooley," who don't even look at us at all if they don't feel like it, who behave towards us, their elders, exactly as

we behaved toward ours some twenty-five years ago and as no young people have been quite able to behave really since.

I must admit that young composers are not as visible in the cafés as poets are; they never were. Pianists, however, peep out from every corner. To a man, and at all ages, they are occupied with what seems to be the central esthetic problem in music today, the creation of an acceptable style-convention for performing Mozart. I've spent a good deal of time at that job too this winter, and I have found out some things about Mozart's piano music I will tell you another time. . . .

I've discovered music all over again. And it turns out to be just as it was when I was seventeen, the daily function of practising a beloved instrument and of finding one's whole life filled with order and with energy as a result.

But of all that, more another time. Give my best to the fellahs.

Je t'embrasse en camarade,

Virgil