

MODERN MUSIC

HONEGGER AND HIS TIME

BY EMILE VUILLERMOZ

FRENCH music, silent during the war, awoke with something of a start the day after the armistice. There are two famous lines in our national anthem which always bring a smile because they so well express youthful ambition: *Nous entrerons dans la carrière quand nos aînés n'y seront plus*. The day after the great war, a group of young musicians decided the moment had come to make this phrase their slogan. Claude Debussy had just died. Gabriel Fauré felt his strength progressively diminishing; Paul Dukas was mute; Maurice Ravel was taking uneasy account of himself. Everywhere the dawn of a new world was foreseen, of an unimaginable civilization and an unknown ideal. The war seemed to have opened an unbridgeable chasm between the generations of yesterday and tomorrow. It was then that some audacious schoolboys saw their opportunity to profit by this period of confusion.

Writers and painters, always classifiers and theoreticians, hastily codified the principles of a still unformulated aesthetic. Stimulated by the quite legitimate desire to clear the atmosphere of the present period, they drafted a catechism summing up the beliefs of the younger generation.

First of all it was agreed that impressionism was dead and that something else must be found. Soon the cry went forth: we need Barbarians. This was really the lesson of the war for those young men who had taken no part in it.

Supported by subtle commentators, these theories flowered into pictorial works and an interesting literature. The musicians wanted to take part in the movement. And so was formed that

group of young composers—The Six—who managed to achieve a sort of splendid mystification successful far beyond their hopes.

Desire for a renaissance was so strong in intellectual circles that they immediately extended credit to these facetious adolescents and generously lent them all sorts of ambitions which they did not cherish. Of these six very different temperaments, three proved to be as essentially mediocre in their invention as in their technique; the fourth was remarkable for a certain calculated boldness of form and for great dexterity of phrase; the fifth tried to specialize in crude humor,—and the sixth spread his wings and hurled himself in full flight into the career of a creator.

Today, after several months of reaction, the misconception has been cleared up. Durey has returned to obscurity; Mlle. Tailleferre and Poulenc continue to write pleasant traditional works; Georges Auric laboriously manufactures studio farces and droll ballets for Russian and Swedish performers; Darius Milhaud trims his sails to the wind and cleverly writes works that are impersonal, and Arthur Honegger, long since repudiated by his jealous comrades, makes a sweeping entrance into the history of contemporary music.



This young composer of Swiss origin who has, however, carried on his musical studies in France, was in no sense designed to fulfill the artificial and ingenious literary ideal which it amused Jean Cocteau to inject into the little band in the hope of transforming it into the *avant-garde*. He never respected the rules of the game. From his Helvetian inheritance, he secretly preserved the hearty appetite for music, the abundance and density of inspiration that characterizes the artists of Central Europe.

His work has that sort of Teutonic robustness which is noticeable in a native of Lorraine like Florent Schmitt. In the life of the German people music plays an almost alimentary role. They consume harmony with characteristic avidity. Their faculty of absorption surpasses that of their neighbors. In the orchestral field the German music-lover is a *gros-mangeur*. He must

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be served with solid and substantial dishes. Too light an instrumental cuisine interests him very little; but he easily digests the rich gastronomic preparations of a Wagner, a Brahms, a Richard Strauss.

Without wishing to seem facetious nor to scorn a table and a style which are equally good, it can be said of the Germans that they are as naturally at their ease in the presence of the complex and compact polyphony of contrapuntal writing as before the tangled strands of a dish of their national sauer-kraut. This plenty, this abundance, this luxuriance pleases their ear as it does their palate. For cookery, which is an art, is a useful index to a people's temperament; and one could in all seriousness draw wide comparisons of this kind. All forms of pleasure are kin; and all tastes comply with some hidden logic. In music, as in painting, there are the wets and the dries; meat-eaters and vegetarians; game lovers and cocktail drinkers; tasters of fine wines and teetotalers; those who like bitter flavors and those who have a sweet tooth. Honegger has a taste for the copious, a large and ample sensualism. Despite all previous fixed resolves, despite all discipline, his music could not but soon bear witness to these qualities.

A vain attempt was made to present this fresh, wholesome artist as a Machiavelli, engrossed solely in preparing to revolutionize the history of art. He did, indeed, derive great practical benefit from his career with the pseudo-revolutionary squad; it gave him a very advantageous start. Without the audacious and noisy publicity which this group organized, Honegger would have had to wait much longer for the hour of his success. The Six have rendered at least this service to the music of their time: they have pushed to quick fame the musician whom they excommunicated.



One achievement this little sect will not forgive Honegger: his *Le Roi David*. The brilliant success of this work, its prompt acceptance, the applause which it earned in all circles, in France and elsewhere, were never pardoned by his comrades in arms.

Some kind critics have even insinuated that a popular enthusiasm so universal must necessarily denote great mediocrity of thought. We will not stop to refute such a false allegation; it is really too easy and too obvious to claim that a work favorably received must be worthless, and that one whose score is hissed must be a work of genius. In reality, what makes *Le Roi David* an irresistible score is its admirable spontaneity and profound sincerity. This oratorio was composed for a performance at the Theatre du Jorat under conditions requiring great speed. The composer, therefore, had no time to over-refine his vocabulary and method of expression for the sake of the current mode. He could not mask his true thought. Moreover, the original orchestration was written for a band without strings, and the domain of wind instruments is well known to be the one that musicians of today are most feverishly exploring. The strings, interrogated for many centuries by restless, sensitive souls, apparently have given up all their secrets. The wood-winds and the brasses, on the other hand, are still rich in mysteries that musicians are discovering gradually and with astonishment. It is for this reason that the most sensitive experimenters of today are excited about the technique of jazz, which opens up such strange perspectives.

In *Le Roi David*, Honegger has succeeded in using the strong, fresh color of wind instruments in the happiest way; and I scarcely know whether he was right in rewriting his first version to facilitate the performance by regular symphony orchestras. The subject, moreover, suited him to perfection. These twenty-eight fragments gave him the opportunity to treat a variety of themes with very different color effects. The classicism of Bach is neighbor to the charms of a Ravel or a Debussy and to accents of savagery and oriental languor. In his processions and fanfares, the influence of *Le Sacre du Printemps* asserts itself; but *Les Lamentations de Guilboa*, *La Mort de David*, *La Danse devant l'Arche*, demonstrate a very different formation of the ear. And if the psalm, *Loué soit le Seigneur*, is the triumph of contrapuntal suppleness, the psalm, *L'Eternel est ma Lumière*, is a model of purely harmonic writing where the chords interlink with the same suave audacity as in certain pages of *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*.

Le Roi David shows some examples of the famous polytonal writing about which so much has been said and so many inanities have been written. But here there is no question, as is so often the case, of an artificially determined mannerism. Some young composers, anxious to keep in the limelight at all costs, laboriously tear down their polyphony to obtain an aggressive superposition of tonalities. In chamber music, this method does not noticeably enrich our vocabulary, but in descriptive music, polytonality makes certain very happy effects possible.

Arthur Honegger, in describing crowds and processions, has been able to make skillful use of themes that keep their tonal independence. He thus creates not only a very rare mixture of colors, but a new aural architecture, revealing clear plans, distance, and perspective which lend a feeling of space and depth to the orchestral picture.

And considering the extraordinary diversity of technical methods and styles used in *Le Chant d'Ephraïm*, the song, *Ah! si j'avais des ailes de colombe*, *Le Psaume de Pénitence*, the psalm, *Ne crains rien*, and *Le Chant de la Servante*, the score of *Le Roi David* clearly shows such abundance, vitality, and impetuous inspiration that no sincere public could resist its eloquence.

This work has another noteworthy merit, which appears more and more rarely among our young musicians. Its composer has treated the written text with respect and has taken account of the expressive and the musical values of the words. This precision of accent, this evocative power, its suppleness and vigor, simplicity and nobility, the elements of the picturesque, of descriptive poetry and intrinsic lyric quality, are not these enough to guarantee a glorious future as well as the immediate success of the work!

Naturally, the final phase in the evolution of Honegger's talent is not to be sought in *Le Roi David*. This musician, to my notion, is still in the full stride of development, and the ultimate formula of composition toward which he is tending cannot as yet be defined with certainty. He is seeking it in the startling pages of *Le Chant de Nigamon*, which has so many new accents and such powerful coloring. He is seeking it also in *Horace Victorieux*, which radiates the proud and brutal joy of youth. He is making his way toward it in the *Prélude* for *The Tempest* of Shakespeare,

in the thrilling *Pastorale d'Eté* and in *La Mort de Sainte Al-méenne*; but perhaps the most prophetic indication he has given us is in the beautiful symphonic picture *Pacific 231*, a fascinating description of an American locomotive in which all the grandeur of modern machinery is extolled.

This brings up one of the most curious phases of contemporary aesthetics. The young musicians have complacently subscribed to all the theories whose tendency is to separate their technique from that of literature or painting; but as a matter of practice, they have rarely had the opportunity to employ these axioms effectively. In *Pacific 231*, Arthur Honegger has applied these principles by presenting to his hearers a machine tearing full-steam-ahead through the night, without a single concession to program music and without recourse to the puerile manner of imitative music. It is by purely musical means that the composer has translated this internal dynamism and has achieved the *tour de force* of evoking in sound that special drunkenness which is the lyric quality of speed.

His mind lucid, well-poised, free from prejudices and fears, Arthur Honegger manifests a balance not usually found in creators of his age. He goes his way with regular step, without haste or apprehension. And I am one of those who believe that his way leads to fame.

