

## II

### CONTEMPORARY MUSIC <sup>1</sup>

**I**T is of course impossible to offer any adequate survey of contemporary music or even of one of its phases within the space of a single lecture; moreover, I hasten to admit that there is only one thing which I should find still more difficult, and that would be to explain my own music or comment upon it; indeed, were I in position fully to explain my music, I should then be inclined to doubt its worth and value. The reasons which lead me to this conclusion are, perhaps, different from those generally cited by lecturers on art. For instance, it is often said that music defies analysis, whereas other fine arts, such as painting, sculpture, and architecture, have not a medium of manifestation so intangible, elusive, and evanescent as the vibration of sound. On this point I differ somewhat, because I am under the impression that current progress in acoustical science makes possible dimensional measurements of sound as many and as varied as are those of other means of artistic expression, employed, for example, in architecture. I would even say that since the young Russian scientist, Theremin, has perfected his original instruments, and can now transform ethereal vibrations into tonal vibrations of any pitch, intensity, or quality that he may desire, the sound part of music would seem to have come quite within the reach of analysis. So it is not because of the elusiveness of sound vibrations that I consider it impossible to explain

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or judge a work of musical art; indeed, I have the same feeling about other works of art whether in painting, sculpture, or architecture. Would it be, then, that I do not accept the so-called classical laws of harmony, counterpoint, and so on? Whether I recognize their validity or not is of little importance to me in judging contemporary compositions, for these classical laws originated in works of the past; they have been formulated and adopted by teachers in their efforts to find a permanent basis, solid and suitable, for their courses of instruction; and this body of doctrine has undergone change after change in accommodating itself to new laws peculiar to new compositions appearing from time to time. No academic attempt to establish permanent laws, however, ever helped or hindered the advancement of work in art. The matter might be summed up by saying that in musical treatises there are no such laws as would be of any avail in judging a contemporary musical work of art. Apparently the uselessness of all such arguments must come from the fact that such would-be laws are dealing only with the obvious and superficial part of the work of art without ever reaching those infinitely minute roots of the artist's sensitiveness and personal reaction. The elusive roots, or sources, are often sensed as two in character: one might be called the national consciousness, its territory being rather extensive; while the other, the individual consciousness, seems to be the product of an egocentric process. Both defy classification and analysis as well, yet every sensitive artist perceives the value of their influence in the creation of a real work of art. The manifestation of these two types of consciousness in music may break or satisfy all the academic rules, but such circumstance is of insignificant importance compared with the real aim, namely, fullness and sincerity of expression. We have here to do,

perhaps, with that inner motion which purposely sets our intelligence and perception to seek its own development in its own atmosphere and tradition—not its historical tradition, but the tradition which heredity makes one feel to be true to one's nature. Such search may be intensively selective, and then becomes a clearing process applied to our natural gifts and supervised by our individual consciousness. Here, again, I insist that no stated laws can be given whereby to judge the degree of perfection attained in this process on the part of the individual, inasmuch as what we are attempting to discover is only sensed and as yet unknown. So were I able to explain and demonstrate the value of my own works, it would then prove, at least from my personal point of view, that they are constructed altogether of obvious, superficial, tangible elements within easy reach of formal analysis, and, therefore, that these works of mine are not perfect works of art. The difficulty remains when one attempts either to classify or to state definitely relative estimates of one's contemporaries in music, not excepting those among one's own countrymen. Indeed, from this point of view, any attempt to arrive at a definite judgment with respect to a work of art seems to me to be folly.

On the initial performance of a new musical composition, the first impression of the public is generally one of reaction to the more superficial elements of its music, that is to say, to its external manifestations rather than to its inner content. The listener is impressed by some unimportant peculiarity in the medium of expression, and yet the idiom of expression, even if considered in its completeness, is only the means and not the end in itself, and often it is not until years after, when the means of expression have finally surrendered all their secrets, that the real inner emotion of the music becomes apparent to the listener. Thus, for example,

if we consider present-day reviews of the compositions of Arnold Schönberg and Darius Milhaud, it often seems as though chromatism and atonality on the one hand, and diatonism versus polytonality on the other, were the only significant traits of these two artists; nevertheless, in either case, it often seems as though such a judgment would reveal but the garb concealing or adorning their emotional sensitiveness, and we should always remember that sensitiveness and emotion constitute the real content of a work of art. Furthermore, the acute and subtle perception guiding the artist in his creative work is itself in continuous evolution, for, just as any of the ordinary senses may be trained and made to perceive better to-day than yesterday, so this perception within the individual and national heritage of atmosphere and tradition may become keener and keener year after year, leaving no place for standardized and permanent classification.

I may be able to express my thought more perfectly if we consider briefly these ideas of nationalism and individualism in their relations to music. And what I hazard to express in this connection is my individual understanding of the more striking characteristics of contemporary music as exhibited in the works of some of my friends. At all events, I hope in this way to illustrate my thought more adequately.

For example, in the works of Darius Milhaud, probably the most important of our younger French composers, one is frequently impressed by the vastness of the composer's conceptions. This quality of Milhaud's music is far more individual than his use, so frequently commented upon, and often criticised, of polytonality (a conception of the simultaneous use of several tonalities, of which we may find embryonic examples as early as the chorals of J. S. Bach,

in certain passages of Beethoven, and in the definite use thereof by Richard Strauss). If we consider broadly one of his larger works, the "Choephores", we soon discover that on attaining the climax of a series of utterances tragic in character, in the course of which the most sweeping use is made of all the resources of musical composition, including polytonal writing, Milhaud nevertheless reaches still profounder depths of his own artistic consciousness in a scene where a strong pathetic psalmody is accompanied only by percussion. Here it is no longer polytonality which expresses Milhaud, and yet this is one of the pages where Milhaud most profoundly reveals himself. Of similar significance is the fact that in one of his latest works, *Les Malheurs d'Orphée*, in its recent American première at one of the New York concerts of Pro Musica, Milhaud's occasional use of polytonality is so intricately interwoven with lyric and poetic elements as to be scarcely distinguishable, while his acknowledged artistic personality reappears clothed with a certain clarity of melodic design altogether Gallic in character. Again, we might note the singularly dramatic qualities of Delannoy, the facile and popular musical content of works of Poulenc, the accuracy of form and elegance of orchestration in Roland Manuel, and the peculiar tendency on the part of G. Auric to etch his music sharply, often to the point of an acute and satiric vein. Such inherent and widely divergent traits appertain to different individuals rather than to a single school; and this could also be said of the genial music of Germaine Tailleferre. In Arthur Honegger, still another member of what a French critic has labeled the *Groupe des Six*, we find, not only individual traits, but hereditary and racial characteristics altogether different from those of the four composers just mentioned, and this racial consciousness of

Honegger he expresses without reserve. From his musical education, received at the hands of French teachers on French soil, Honegger seems to have conserved a facility in writing which he uses for self-expression along the lines of German expansiveness, and his music remains true to his racial consciousness—that is to say, the German consciousness, for he was born of German-Swiss parentage. The latter statement is meant neither in a derogatory sense, nor in one of praise; it simply says that, while we can reconcile the various tendencies expressed by Milhaud, Poulenc, and Auric, as being all equally rooted in French national consciousness, it is from the German national consciousness that the art of Honegger springs. If we should consider still other young French musicians, we should find this phase of racial consciousness again in evidence; for we should not find the German character in the curiously dramatic qualities of M. Delannoy's music, or in the refined and intimate music of Roland Manuel.

This national consciousness of musicians distinctively German is expansive, while our French consciousness is one of reserve. In virtue of the indissoluble ties binding each to his respective national consciousness, it is, of course, inconceivable that either one should be able to express himself adequately in the language of the other. Nationalism does not deprive the composer either of his personal soul or of its individual expression, for each creative artist has within him laws peculiar to his own being. These laws, peculiar to the artist himself, are, perhaps, the most momentous elements at play in the whole process of musical creation; they seem to be determined through an interplay of national and individual consciousness; and they can be imparted to the artist by no teacher, for they spring from his own heritage, and are first perceived only by himself.

Such laws in the course of years may become those of a school, of pupils, or imitators, or of followers, but whenever a real artist appears, he evolves from his own consciousness new laws peculiar to himself. Incidentally, I should like to remark that musicians who are true alike to their national consciousness and to their own individuality often appreciate compositions altogether different from their own, but a Germanized French musician or a Gallitized musician of Germany will have a tendency to fail in understanding the musical works of others—the hybrid failing to recognize other personalities because of the loss of its own individuality. If we should now consider our lawful portion of inheritance from other musicians, the evident value of such a heritage, and the eventual danger of plagiarism, I should place on the legitimate side exchanges in emotional expression, the influence of experimental or incomplete compositions, which may be absorbed or assimilated without loss either of individual or of national consciousness; while, on the opposite side, I would put all efforts, either through imitation or plagiarism, to conceal absence or weakness of personality. It may sometimes be extremely difficult to decide these questions with respect to a particular work, but here again, the keen perception of the artist is the only dependable guide. Perhaps one of the most curious cases of exchanges of influence is that of Herold, Weber, and Rossini; these three composers were strongly influenced in turn by a common characteristic of their respective works—namely, their romanticism; but each of the three held these interchanges of influence subservient to his own respective national consciousness. It was French romantic music that Herold wrote, Rossini's romanticism was obviously Italian, while Weber remained to the end a German romanticist. Such influences enlarge the horizon of the aspiring

artist without contracting either his personality or his heritage. Relations of this sort in works of some of my predecessors or contemporaries I shall be pointing out later on in this lecture. It is very important to estimate these influences carefully, inasmuch as they may be of good or ill effect, depending upon the quality of the influence and even more upon the strength of the personality subjected to them. For example, the influence of Liszt on Wagner was altogether considerable, and yet the personality of the latter was in no way impaired, despite the generous way in which he used the artistic heritage of his father-in-law. The thematic influence of Liszt on Wagner is certainly more than obvious, but the æsthetic of Wagner, however extensive, is essentially individual. Another significant influence, somewhat unique, and deriving at least partially from Chabrier, is that of Eric Satie, which has had appreciable effect upon Debussy, myself, and indeed most of the modern French composers. Satie was possessed of an extremely keen intelligence. His was the inventor's mind par excellence. He was a great experimenter. His experiments may never have reached the degree of development or realization attained by Liszt; but, alike in multiplicity and importance, these experiments have been of inestimable value. Simply and ingeniously Satie pointed the way, but as soon as another musician took to the trail he had indicated, Satie would immediately change his own orientation and without hesitation open up still another path to new fields of experimentation. He thus became the inspiration of countless progressive tendencies; and while he himself may, perhaps, never have wrought out of his own discoveries a single complete work of art, nevertheless we have to-day many such works which might not have come into existence if Satie had never lived. This influence of his was not in the least



dogmatic, and, for this reason, of all the greater value to other musicians. Debussy held him in the highest esteem. Influences such as his are as fertile soil, propitious to the growth of rare flowers, wherein the individual consciousness, the indispensable seed, nourished in better surroundings thus provided, may still unfold according to its own essential nature, national, racial, or individual.

As often as not, the national consciousness is the creative artist's original source of inspiration. For example, the objectivity and clarity of design exhibited by our earliest composers furnished a rich heritage to our incomparable C. A. Debussy, the most phenomenal genius in the history of French music. Does this mean to say that Debussy was only an imitator? Certainly not! Again, is the symbolism of Debussy, his so-called impressionism, at variance with the Gallic spirit? Quite the contrary, because beneath the fine and delicate lacework of atmospheric surface, one may easily discover a refined precision of design, characteristically French. His genius was obviously one of great individuality, creating its own laws, constantly in evolution, expressing itself freely, yet always faithful to French tradition. For Debussy, the musician and the man, I have had profound admiration, but by nature I am different from Debussy, and while I consider that Debussy may not have been altogether alien to my personal inheritance, I should identify also with the earlier phase of my evolution Gabriel Fauré, Emmanuel Chabrier, and Eric Satie. The æsthetic of Edgar Allan Poe, your great American, has been of singular importance to me, and also the immaterial poetry of Mallarmé—unbounded visions, yet precise in design, enclosed in a mystery of sombre abstractions—an art where all the elements are so intimately bound up together that one cannot analyze, but only sense, its effect. Nevertheless

I believe that I myself have always followed a direction opposite to that of Debussy's symbolism.

Let us now turn to another aspect of my own work which may be of more immediate interest to you. To my mind, the "blues" is one of your greatest musical assets, truly American despite earlier contributory influences from Africa and Spain. Musicians have asked me how I came to write "blues" as the second movement of my recently completed sonata for violin and piano. Here again the same process, to which I have already alluded, is in evidence, for, while I adopted this popular form of your music, I venture to say that nevertheless it is French music, Ravel's music, that I have written. Indeed, these popular forms are but the materials of construction, and the work of art appears only on mature conception where no detail has been left to chance. Moreover, minute stylization in the manipulation of these materials is altogether essential. To understand more fully what I mean by the process to which I refer, it would be sufficient to have these same "blues" treated by some of your own musicians and by musicians of European countries other than France, when you would certainly find the resulting compositions to be widely divergent, most of them bearing the national characteristics of their respective composers, despite the unique nationality of their initial material, the American "blues". Think of the striking and essential differences to be noted in the "jazz" and "rags" of Milhaud, Stravinsky, Casella, Hindemith, and so on. The individualities of these composers are stronger than the materials appropriated. They mould popular forms to meet the requirements of their own individual art. Again—nothing left to chance; again—minute stylization of the materials employed, while the styles become as numerous as the composers themselves.

In my own work of composition I find a long period of conscious gestation, in general, necessary. During this interval, I come gradually to see, and with growing precision, the form and evolution which the subsequent work should have as a whole. I may thus be occupied for years without writing a single note of the work—after which the writing goes relatively rapidly; but there is still much time to be spent in eliminating everything that might be regarded as superfluous, in order to realize as completely as possible the longed-for final clarity. Then comes the time when new conceptions have to be formulated for further composition, but these cannot be forced artificially, for they come only of their own free will, and often originate in some very remote perception, without manifesting themselves until long years after.

For the last fifteen or twenty years musicians and critics alike have taken great interest in the two divergent tendencies I have already mentioned: atonality and polytonality. And in the impassioned discussions of partisans we have often heard or read that atonality is a blind alley leading nowhere, but I do not accept the validity of this opinion; because, while as a system it may be so, it certainly cannot be as an influence. In fact, the influence of Schönberg may be overwhelming on his followers, but the significance of his art is to be identified with influences of a more subtle kind—not the system, but the æsthetic, of his art. I am quite conscious of the fact that my *Chansons Madécasses* are in no way Schönbergian, but I do not know whether I ever should have been able to write them had Schönberg never written. On the other hand, it has often been said that my music has influenced many of my contemporaries. In particular it has been claimed with some insistence that the earlier appearance of my *Jeux d'eau* possibly influenced

Debussy in the writing of his *Jardins sous la pluie*, while a coincidence, even more striking, has been suggested in the case of my *Habanera*; but comments of this sort I must leave to others. It could very well be, however, that conceptions, apparently similar in character, should mature in the consciousness of two different composers at almost the same time without implying direct influence of either one upon the other. In such case, the compositions may have numerous external analogies, but we can feel the difference in individuality of the two composers, just as no two human beings are ever altogether identical—considering of course at the moment only those composers who have actually sought and discovered their own personality. Again, if under apparently similar outward expression we fail to find dissimilar inner manifestations, it is likely that one of the two composers is a plagiarist of the other.

But we have been wandering somewhat from the subject of our lecture, and, perhaps, for no better reason than that I am unable to say much more about my own compositions and the methods by which they have been brought into being. When the first stroke of a work has been written, and the process of elimination begun, the severe effort toward perfection proceeds by means almost intangible, seemingly directed by currents of inner forces, so intimate and intricate in character as to defy all analysis. Real art, I repeat, is not to be recognized by definitions, or revealed by analysis: we sense its manifestations and we feel its presence: it is apprehended in no other way.

Before closing this short address I wish to say again how very happy I am in visiting your country, and all the more so because my journey is enabling me to become still more conversant with those elements which are contributing to the gradual formation of a veritable school of American

music. That this school will become notable in its final evolution I have not the slightest doubt, and I am also convinced that it will realize a national expression quite as different from the music of Europeans as you yourselves are different from them. Here again, for the nurture of the most sensitive and imaginative of our young composers we should consider national heritage in all its entirety. There are always self-appointed promoters of nationalism in plenty, who profess their creed with a vengeance, but rarely do they agree as to the means to be employed. Among these nationalists in music we can always distinguish two distinct clans constantly waging their warfare of criticism. Now criticism is easy, but art is difficult. Most of these nationalists are painstaking enough in criticism, but few of them are sufficiently so in self-examination. One group believes that folk-lore is the only requisite to national music; the other predicts the birth of national music in the individual of to-day. Meanwhile, within the first clan itself dissension goes on: "Folk-lore? But what in particular is our folk-lore? Indian tunes? But are they American? . . . Negro spirituals? Blues? But are these American?" and so on, until nothing is left of national background. And the field is at last wide open for those musicians whose greatest fear is to find themselves confronted by mysterious urges to break academic rules rather than belie individual consciousness. Thereupon these musicians, good bourgeois as they are, compose their music according to the classical rules of the European epoch, while the folk-lorists, apostles of popular airs, shout in their purism: "Can this be American music if inspired by Europe?" We are thus caught up in a vicious and unproductive circle, unless we turn once more to the past and consider how certain works, held to be essentially national in character, were produced. Wagner

is generally regarded as purely Germanic and yet, as we have already remarked, a great deal of his thematic material was derived from the highly imaginative Franz Liszt, a Hungarian whose own works often and indubitably exhibit a rich flavor of Hungarian folk-lore. It is quite certain that Wagner's remarkable achievement depended upon his success in formulating his own style of manifestation, yet one may doubt that he would ever have written as he did if the abundant wealth of material accumulated by Liszt had not been more or less at his disposal. For example, to the completion of such a work as *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner's extraordinary skill in construction, Liszt's unusual thematic genius, and folk-lore as well—all made contribution. Folk-lore and individual consciousness are alike necessary; and, in nations that are still young from a musical point of view, persistent fidelity of search in these two directions seems to be the greatest lack on the part of composers. With respect to individual consciousness let us not deceive ourselves: its discovery and development is more often than not a lifelong process. Nor should individuality ever be confused with eccentricity. Now, as to collecting the popular songs of which the national folk-lore is made up, I could do no better than cite the remarkable record of two distinguished Hungarian musicians, Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly, in personality altogether unlike, but mutually interested in folk-lore. These gentlemen, from 1905 to 1918, collected more than twelve thousand such songs of Hungary and adjacent countries. Of this number at least six thousand are Hungarian, and Bartok says that he could easily collect an additional thousand every year. Moreover, while assembling in tangible form this incomparable national heritage of Hungarian musicians, Messrs. Bartok and Kodaly have with equally painstaking care

preserved the quality of its material in accurate documentary form by recording the songs on gramophone disks, which are capable of catching and holding permanently the most elusive of folk-lore characteristics, including small variations in pitch, intensity, and quality of sound, for which the cruder medium of our ordinary written musical notation is utterly inadequate.

In conclusion I would say that even if negro music is not of purely American origin, nevertheless I believe it will prove to be an effective factor in the founding of an American school of music. At all events, may this national American music of yours embody a great deal of the rich and diverting rhythm of your jazz, a great deal of the emotional expression in your blues, and a great deal of the sentiment and spirit characteristic of your popular melodies and songs, worthily deriving from, and in turn contributing to, a noble national heritage in music.

MAURICE RAVEL.











