

MODERN MUSIC

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THE NEW NATIONALISM

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THE aftermath of the war in Europe and the collapse of the Nazi occupation has brought about, among other undesirable things, a resurgence of nationalistic feeling in music. The Nazis had two strategies. So long as the war went favorably they tried to establish the superiority of German music by sending their best conductors and virtuosos abroad to prove the cultural supremacy of the Reich. When victory became doubtful the strategy was suddenly changed. Attempts were made to have collaborationist composers and performers work for what the Nazis termed the "concert of Europe." Understandably enough the general feeling is now strongly anti-German. Indicative of this attitude is an interesting article in the new French periodical, *Contrepoints*, in which Marc Pincherle asks whether German music should be played in France.

The issue of nationalism in music was revived by political and cultural oppression; I say revived because in Europe the whole issue was dormant in pre-Hitler days, if not dead. To see the question in the proper perspective it is appropriate to recall the origins of the movement and find to what extent today's European neo-nationalism parallels nationalistic discussions typical of the nineteenth century. Then as now nationalism, brought about by political pressure, was directed against the dominant position of German music in the concert halls. I doubt that the "inferiority complex" of which Gerald Abraham speaks, in a fine discussion of nationalism in *A Hundred Years of Music*, was really as important in the genesis of the movement as we usually think. It is a fact, however, that European musical nationalists all base their arguments on the ideological principles first developed by the early German romanticists with their

discovery of folksong and the thesis that the composer should express in his music the "soul of the people" (*Volksseele*). Paradoxically, by the second half of the nineteenth century nationalism in music had actually become an international movement affecting all countries, but least of all Germany herself. The anomalous German situation can best be illustrated by contrasting Wagner and Brahms. The first is vociferously nationalistic in his writings and many of his opera subjects, the second upholds the universal tradition of symphonic music. Brahms, who occasionally built his themes on folksong patterns, accepted his German background as a matter of course, was indifferent to nationalism and encouraged musicians of other nations like Dvorak. Wagner, on the other hand, made a deliberate point of being Teutonic in spite of the strong influence of the French school on his style. Brahms was a national composer, Wagner a nationalistic one. The distinction between national and nationalistic is one of ideology and not necessarily born out by the musical style of the composer.

It was a new idea, characteristic of the nineteenth century, that there was a peculiar virtue in being consciously national in style. The incorporation of folksong material into symphonic music, a device that still passes as the most effective method of achieving a national flavor, is at best precarious. The idioms of folk and art music are incompatible and, if mixed, lead to incongruities of style that remind one of a bunch of wildflowers in a vase for orchids. The incongruity lies in the fact that folktunes are self-contained unities; they do not lend themselves to successful motivic treatment which, by its very nature, breaks melodic units into fragments. Some composers have merely imitated the formulas and clichés of folksong in their music — a synthetic method used by Borodin and, particularly, by Rimsky-Korsakov, which often produces results seemingly more authentic than the use of true folktunes.

This synthetic nationalism has created a rather paradoxical situation which is not without humor. Once composers had discovered folksong as a potential source for borrowing or imitation, they turned also to folk material of other nationalities, and made nationalism an international movement in still another way. As a consequence we have the Italian scores by Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Tchaikovsky and Strauss; Spanish pieces by Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Bizet, Wolf, Chabrier and Ravel; the *New World Symphony* by Dvorak, the *Indian Fantasy* by Busoni; the excursions of Weber into Oriental lands and Brahms into Hungary. It is ironical too that Brahms in his *Hungarian Dances* did not set true folktunes but medodies by Keler Bela, and also was the victim of a clever hoax of Zuccalmaglio who slipped into his edition of German folksongs skilful imitations of his own, one of which Brahms used for his first piano sonata. To these vagaries we owe a great deal of delightful music, but they

show that nationalism may be only skin-deep and that presence of national material does not make national music.

To the question, what is national in music, there is no answer if folkloristic elements are eliminated. Everybody seems to agree that there is a certain flavor in Debussy's and Sibelius's music that is respectively French or Finnish. One should be able to describe what is meant by French or Finnish quality in terms of a recognizable technique, unless the whole matter is to become a vague feeling or the affirmation of analogies like, "In this composition the spirit of the nation finds its most appropriate expression," – all too familiar in books on music appreciation. When Debussy introduced his novel methods of orchestration and the impressionistic handling of chords, they were regarded as ultra-modern and were considered by the French themselves as not in line with French tradition. Similarly, the rugged orchestration and the atomistic treatment of motives, a symphonic conception in which texture takes the place of structure, are technical features of Sibelius, evolved from Russian models in a highly personal manner.

Now, what is there about these techniques that makes them inherently French or Finnish? Put that way the question implies a negative answer. For they are not confined to any nation. They can be, and actually have been borrowed by many composers of our generation in whose hands they do not suggest a national school. In other words, what passes as typically French or Finnish is, in fact, the individual achievement of an artist strong enough to create the standards and clichés of what in retrospect comes to be accepted as a national school. I believe it was Alfred Einstein who, in his *Greatness in Music*, first made the point that the so-called national characteristics are the consequences of the work of great masters, not their inspiration. French opera received its distinctive national stamp from the two "foreigners," Lully and Gluck. Liszt as well as Bartok worked with Hungarian folk material. It is immaterial here that Liszt took a rather specious type of gypsy music for folk music and that only Bartok opened for us the real sources of Magyar peasant music. In the use of their borrowed material the two composers differ essentially. For Liszt the ostensible folk material serves only as a pretext for flamboyant, utterly external ornamentations in the virtuoso manner of the nineteenth century. Bartok's arrangements combine authentic folk tunes with modern harmonic devices theoretically as far removed from the idiom of folk music as Liszt's superficial settings. Only through Bartok's intensely personal handling does he attain an effect that seems to belong. Even where he does not draw on folksong, in many of his major works, he seems close to what we believe to be Hungarian style. Actually, however, it is the personal style of Bartok that we admire, because no other Hungarian

composer had developed it before him though it will indubitably be imitated from now on. We find confirmation of the point made before about the national and nationalistic attitude of composers when we realize that Bartok, a truly national composer, was strongly opposed to the Hungarian nationalistic feeling current during his lifetime.

The distinction between national and nationalistic can also be applied to American music. Nationalism became an issue in this country more than a generation after it took form in Europe. In certain Balkan countries and in Australia it likewise appeared as late as, if not later than, in the Americas. While Europe today goes through a phase of neo-nationalism we here are still experiencing the last phase of the original movement.

Never before have so many efforts been made to cultivate and further the cause of American music, not only at special music festivals dedicated to this purpose, but also in conservatories and colleges. These tendencies deserve support to the extent that they aim to uncover new native talent, to give young composers and performers a chance to be heard, and to acquaint the public with the latest or undeservedly neglected works. But when the aim is primarily, as certain pronouncements seem to indicate, to produce an American Brahms or Schubert, it is misdirected by national bias and is naive propaganda. It would be distressing to see a young composer sit down and try hard and self-consciously to be "national" rather than good.

One of the first generations of American composers, the New England group (Foote, Chadwick and others), was still dominated by the German academic outlook and did not rise above the average solid workmanship of that school. A more recent group of American musicians studied with Mlle. Boulanger; this group has produced such strongly contrasting composers as Copland, Harris, Thomson, Piston and Blitzstein, who entertain varying views on nationalism. The youngest generation will probably get its entire musical instruction in this country, and the time may not be distant when young Europeans will come here for their final musical education. This trend will not be forced by a self-conscious nationalism, but rather by the superior artistic and economic opportunities in a country not devastated by the war.

At the recent International Music Festival in Prague the music of various countries, including the United States, was performed with the active support of the State Department. The reaction of certain Czech critics to American music was illuminating because here European neo-nationalism met American nationalism face to face. The program included, of course, the *Rhapsody in Blue*, which still passes in Europe for the essence of American music. It will hardly surprise anyone familiar with the

hazy ideas of European intellectuals about America to hear jazz proclaimed as the spiritual background of American music. One critic wrote, "Even if to date we cannot speak of an independent American music, what we heard at least shows that there is a remarkable effort . . ." He registered surprise that the music was not "independent of European models," and disappointment that there were no national characteristics in certain compositions.

Neo-nationalism does not adduce new arguments, but merely revives the old familiar one of nationalism. To use the standards of nationalism for judgments today is anachronistic, because they are standards of the nineteenth century. The techniques of such strongly "national" composers as Bartok, Stravinsky and, to a lesser degree, Falla, have become universal tools for composers. The integration of the characteristics of national schools which we have witnessed between the two world wars is a process that cannot be stopped or reversed. To insist on nationalism today means to ignore a more vital and decisive issue, that of modern music as a whole. It may seem paradoxical but those fervid advocates of nationalism who raise a Macedonian cry of independence and artistic autarchy actually draw their spiritual ammunition direct from the German romantic school; they perpetuate rather than destroy its influence.