

THE LYRICISM OF MILHAUD

AARON COPLAND

ENTHUSIASM for the music of Darius Milhaud is almost non-existent in America. There has been no lack of opportunity to hear his work—Milhaud himself has twice toured the country as conductor and pianist, playing his own compositions—but the public and the journalists remain uninterested, when they are not openly antagonistic. Even those who specifically concern themselves with new music invariably show marked surprise when I voice admiration for the composer of *La Création du Monde*. They seem completely mystified when I add that in my estimation no other living composer is less well understood (at any rate, none whose work has gained recognition and performance to the same extent) and that Milhaud has proved himself the most important figure among the younger Frenchmen.

A simple and unprejudiced approach to Milhaud's music was made difficult from the start by the peculiar circumstances surrounding his early years of activity as a composer. Almost immediately the real Milhaud was obscured by a legend which sprang up around his name. He gained the reputation of a man who delighted in antagonizing people. As has been said, when others were thinking "Down with Wagner" it was Milhaud who cried "Down with Wagner." His music was more dissonant, his critical reviews more outspoken and his general revolutionary tenets more violent than those of any of the other young radicals who grouped themselves about Satie and Cocteau in 1919. To the majority he seemed a noisy and aggressive upstart; to others more kindly disposed he was an amusing fellow, full of life and verve, but essentially a "blagueur." Milhaud did nothing to correct this impression—possibly he enjoyed encouraging it. Sympathetic commentators strengthened the misunderstanding by placing the

greatest stress on the "crude, highly colored, noisy" aspect of the composer.

Even today something of this original legend hangs about Milhaud. How false it is has been pointed out by the astute Boris de Schloezer whose article on Milhaud in *La Revue Musicale* of April 1925 is the only just appraisal of his work known to this writer.

One fact is incontrovertible: above every other consideration Milhaud's gift is clearly that of a lyricist. His musical nature impels him toward one end: a spontaneous outpouring of the emotions in terms of pure music. Schloezer considers Milhaud closer to the romantic Schönberg than to the classic Stravinsky. I cannot follow him in this. Milhaud's art is certainly more subjective than that of Stravinsky but it is romantic only in the sense that all lyricism in the modern age is associated with the romantic spirit; in emotional content it is much nearer the classic lyricism of a Fauré than the expressionism of the Viennese school. Milhaud's subjectivism is calm, detached—it sounds what one might call a humanistic note and when, as sometimes happens, it turns violent, it never can be confused with the exasperated violence belonging to the heart-on-the-sleeve school of the last century.

Springing from a native lyricism, his music always sings. Whether he composes a five act opera or a two page song this singing quality is paramount. The music flows so naturally that it seems to have been improvised rather than composed. What Milhaud writes comes from the "deep places of the mind"—from a kind of secondary consciousness over which he seems to assert no control.

This utter simplicity of approach has endowed him with a style uniquely and unmistakably his own. You can distinguish a page of Milhaud from among a hundred others. Unlike Stravinsky or Schönberg, who both evolved an individual speech gradually, Milhaud is recognizably himself in his earliest compositions: witness, for example, certain sections of his first opera, *La Brebis Égarée*, begun at the age of eighteen or the song, *Paper Boats*, from *Child Poems*, written at twenty-four. At the same time he has been able to enrich his own style by submitting to a series of widely differing influences: first Debussy, then, with his two year

stay in Brazil, the popular melodies he heard there, later Stravinsky, then jazz, then Satie. Whatever he touches becomes pure Milhaud. The *Poèmes Juifs*, the *Rag-Caprices*, the ballet *Salade* (derived respectively from Jewish melodies, jazz and Satie) have all received his imprint. Milhaud is, it is true, sometimes guilty of repeating certain harmonic and rhythmic formulas. But for the most part his homogeneity of style results from the effortless reflection of a distinct personality.

Milhaud's most characteristic trait is a tender, naive and all-pervading charm. To sense it to the full inevitably means that one has come under the spell of the composer. With a quietly moving diatonic melody and a few thick-sounding harmonies he creates a kind of charmed atmosphere entirely without impressionistic connotation. When it is darkly colored it becomes the expression of profound nostalgia—a nostalgia which has nothing of pessimism in it and almost no yearning, but a deep sense of the tragedy of all life. Since this nostalgia is shared by none of his French confrères, I take it to be a sign of Milhaud's Jewish blood. That he is not so racial a composer as Bloch or Mahler seems natural if we remember that his ancestors settled in Provence in the fifteenth century so that his Jewishness has been long tempered by the French point of view. Nevertheless, his subjectivism, his violence and his strong sense of logic (as displayed in his use of polytonality) are indications that the Jewish spirit is still alive in him.

His music can be quite French when it is gay and alert. In this mood his love for simple folk-like melodies and clear-cut rhythms is apparent. When the harmonies turn acidulous and the rhythms are oddly accented his gaiety becomes more brusque and truculent. Structurally, the music is always under complete control. One never meets with over-development in Milhaud—he states the core of the matter and then stops. Thus a long work is often built up on a series of short, highly condensed forms. Very characteristic also is the personal manner in which the music is put together. In this respect it is curious to compare Milhaud with a composer like Hindemith who uses his phenomenal technical equipment in an almost impersonal way. With Milhaud even the musical materials are fashioned by an entirely in-

dividual hand (To specify exactly how this is done would lead us into too many technicalities).

This young Frenchman possesses an amazing facility. A short three-act opera is composed in a period of less than two weeks. Few men of thirty-six can boast so large and varied an output. The musical presses of several countries have been busy issuing his work and still a great deal remains unpublished. A list of his compositions includes operas, ballets, oratorios, incidental music for several dramas, music for orchestra and chamber orchestra, a large number of songs, piano pieces and choral music. Little wonder that Milhaud has often been reproached with writing too much. Naturally all this music cannot be of equal value. Moreover he sometimes repeats himself. But I do not join those who demand that Milhaud compose more carefully; his productivity is too essential a part of his musical gift. As with every other prolific composer, past and present, we must be content to choose the best from among his productions.

Let me point to a few lyrical examples of his work for which I hold a special brief.

In the first rank I should place his ballets. The third one particularly, *La Création du Monde*, is a little masterpiece. Composed in 1923 on a scenario of Blaise Cendrars, it treats of the creation of the world according to African legends. Much of the musical material is based, appropriately enough, on jazz—there is a fugue on a jazz theme, a fascinating blues section and then a long breathed melody over a barber-shop chord accompaniment. Milhaud has understood better than any other European how to assimilate the jazz idiom. In *La Création du Monde* he has completely transformed the jazz spirit. When jazz is long forgotten this work will live. As a stage picture it is less striking than *L'Homme et Son Désir* but from a purely musical standpoint—melodic invention, form, orchestration—it is one of Milhaud's most perfected pieces of work.

Since 1924 Milhaud has turned his attention to the operatic stage and has produced in quick succession *Les Malheurs d'Orphée*; *Esther de Carpentras*; *Le Pauvre Matelot*; three one-act chamber operas: *L'Enlèvement d'Europe*; *Thésée, Ariane*; and, most recently, a large opera-oratorio, *Christophe Colomb*.

Ten years ago Milhaud had a deserved reputation as experimenter: in *Protée* he tried his hand at unaccompanied groups of percussion; in the *Fifth String Quartet* his polytonality was more logical and strict than any yet attempted; in the *Sixth Symphony* he wrote for novel instrumental combinations. But in these recent works he has renounced all interest in technical innovations; he seems content merely to give to the stage the purest expression of his lyricism.

Le Pauvre Matelot will serve as example. It was performed for the first time in December 1927 at the Opéra-Comique and according to first-night reports was a notorious failure. The libretto by Jean Cocteau relates the banal story of a long-lost sailor who returns disguised as a stranger to a faithful, waiting wife. At the end an unconventional twist is given to the simple plot when the wife kills the disguised stranger, not recognizing her husband. This story is set to music of the utmost simplicity, music which is without relation to what we usually consider operatic. Simple characters sing a succession of simple songs, some in a folk vein, others like popular romances. At a first hearing the work seems trite and ordinary. Later its quiet charm and naturalness grow on one. It cannot be counted among Milhaud's best works, but it is easy to understand why the unsophisticated audiences that form the regular public of the Opéra-Comique, faithful as ever to their *Manon* and Puccini, have accepted *Le Pauvre Matelot* more readily than the first-nighters, thereby making it one of the successful operas of the repertoire. Milhaud, the revolutionist, must smile at this strange fate.

A word should be accorded the three little one act chamber operas. They last about eight minutes each—Milhaud calls them “opéra-minute”—and deserve to be classed as miniature masterworks. It is difficult to choose a favorite among them. They are delightfully fresh in melody and rhythm and perfectly adapted to the new medium of chamber opera. The final scene of *L'Enlèvement d'Europe* is one of the most personal and sensuously beautiful that Milhaud has yet written.

In his earlier work also, many arresting examples of Milhaud's lyricism can be found. A detailed analysis of each one is not possible here, but a few should be named: the *Sonata* for two violins

and piano; the *Fourth* and *Seventh String Quartets*; the *Poèmes Juifs* and the *Catalogue des Fleurs* for voice and piano, the *Saudades do Brazil* for piano; *Le Printemps* for violin and piano.

Little of this music has been given an adequate number of hearings in America. Milhaud is a good example of the modern composer who suffers from the inevitable superficiality of most of our professional criticism and public opinion regarding new music, based as it usually is on a single and often imperfect performance of a new work. It is true that few new works demand more than a single hearing. But it is no less true that the personality of a new and worth-while composer is no different from the personality of a new and worth-while acquaintance; they both impose upon us the necessity for longer familiarity than can be obtained in the quick exchange of the concert hall if we are to judge of their significance. The mere fact of being able to follow each strand of melody or even the structure of a new work is often only comparable to knowing that the new acquaintance has delicate fingers and a well built body. To think that you know Milhaud because you have heard a few of his works is an illusion. He is eminently the kind of composer whose art must be understood as a whole. When we have been given the opportunity for more than a glance at occasional examples of his work, when his major compositions have been played and replayed and we are able to coordinate our impressions, a basis will have been found for an appreciation of the true value of Darius Milhaud.