

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

## NATIONAL AND UNIVERSAL MUSIC

ALFRED EINSTEIN

*"... the difficulties will be great, since it is necessary to divest oneself of all national prejudices, against which reason does not prevail."*

GLUCK (In a letter to Padre Martinu)  
October 26, 1773

"**N**ATIONAL and Universal Music" is a theme which could not have been set one hundred years ago. Even twenty or thirty years back there was not much more occasion to discuss it. The question became timely or acute only with the World War and it has taken on its truly distinct form only because of the consequences of the war.

The first result of the gross orgy of hate which then filled the world was an equally gross boycott of the music of nations which happened to be enemies. In France, a silly and tiresome campaign was instituted against Richard Wagner; Germany, with a heavy heart but brutal earnestness, boycotted not only *Samson and Delila* and *Carmen* after August, 1914, but from May, 1915 on, even the newest Italian operas, so that the people, deprived of *Bohème* and *Tosca*, could hardly wait until the end of the war. When the bells rang in 1919, the boycott epidemic was over.

This situation, whose blindness and criminal stupidity could only engender new blindness and stupidities, merely intensified a tendency developed in the course of the nineteenth century: the nationalization of the music of individual countries, from the

largest to the not so large, to the small and finally the infinitesimal. During the nineteenth century, Polish, Scandinavian, Russian, and Czech music gradually established themselves alongside what was called German, Italian and French music. Now many more emancipated themselves from any trace of dependence and proclaimed their musical self-sufficiency. England, for example, and others which had claimed no more than a musical dialect, a special idiom, stepped forward with the demand for complete equality of rights. Thus also Hungary, thanks to Bartok and Kodaly; Finland with Sibelius, Rumania with Enesco.

Other states, not fortunate enough to possess such gifted composers, nevertheless did not abandon their claims. Today the smallest national unit or self-styled political entity strives to convert its musical dialect into a national art. In the latest musical reviews we find Turcoman, Paraguayan and even Tierra del Fuegan symphonies announced and exploited alongside those of Schönberg and Mahler. At a disadvantage are only large nations like the United States with its abundance of talented composers not all bound to each other "nationally," or small countries like Switzerland, in which three or four branches of great European races, held together by a political tie, live together in peace and friendliness. At best the Swiss composers can produce only German, French, Italian or Rhaetian music, but that does not subdue their passionate desire for a real, a markedly Swiss music.

The bacillus of nationalism can poison even the most rational. Jugoslavia today has Serbian, Croatian and Slavonic music, or at least Serbian, Croatian and Slavonic composers, all practising their own folklore specialties. In Palestine there are Jews of every degree of culture and the most diverse origin—Oriental, Polish, African, Occidental, some of whom are struggling to create a "Jewish" musical art which, were it ever established, would doubtless be quite different from Mendelssohn's, Mahler's, and Schönberg's. In short, every province, every city, every village preempts a "Heimatkunst" which could not be properly understood a hundred miles away. Triumph of the "*esprit de clocher*." I am surprised that Richard Wagner, who was certainly not born by mere chance in Leipzig, has still to be acclaimed as a "Saxon Composer." A foreigner can hardly meas-

ure just how Saxon Wagner is, not only in poetic diction, but in his most personal means of musical expression. But it would be absurd to attempt to label Wagner merely as a Saxon composer.



During the war, the nationalism of others was a target; but soon afterward it became an obvious necessity to assert one's own nationalism. Certain boycotts and favoritisms persist, even today, depending on the political constellations. These fluctuating partialities and petty hostilities need not concern us in our consideration of principles, but one illuminating case should be cited. In the Third Reich, they have not made up their minds about Moussorgsky. Should *Boris Godunoff* be staged as an eminently Russian and national work, or should it be boycotted as the product of a musician in whom one recognizes the forces of "destruction," a composer who might be termed the father of "musical Bolshevism?" The dilemma is heartrending. It is obviously easy for the art-politicos of the Third Reich to decide that no more symphonies of the arch-romanticist Gustav Mahler should be presented. But Paul Hindemith? A son of the people—his father a whitewasher, his mother a laundress—a real music-maker, almost a musical craftsman! No, his music is "infected with Bolshevism," and suspect of "internationality." The split today lies no longer between the nations, but between "national" and "international." And "international" is paralleled with "supra-national" and "universal," although these are entirely different terms.



We must, it seems, first clear up the concept of "international music," before we come to the theme, "universal music." It is not an agreeable task; but this Augean stable must be cleaned out, or at least, since I am no Hercules, aired.

In the nineteenth century the word "international" possessed its lustre; at the approach of the twentieth century it was still estimable and harmless; only in the age of frenzied nationalism has it become a slogan and an abusive epithet.

This is also true in music. But is there a really "international"

music? No, it is only a bogey, nothing more. There is no international music and there never has been. National music is a reality, although the label is nothing but a statement of limitations. Whether some music is national, and to what degree or whether it is open to the reproach of "internationality," tells us nothing of its quality, of its artistic value. Many of the greatest artistic works cannot be "exported," and this is just as true of the most worthless products of thought—crossword puzzles for example. In this respect the different arts vary. The plastic are the best off. Michelangelo's bust of *Brutus* or the *Madonna* in San Lorenzo at Florence "speak" to everyone for whom a piece of sculpture means anything, although they are not only very individual but definitely Italian; the Cathedral of Chartres has a message even for a Neapolitan; the Temple of Poseidon in Paestum even for a Finn. The worst off is poetry. Particularly that which is finest and deepest is non-transferable, is "nationally bound." *Don Quixote* can be translated as an epic into all languages without loss of poetry or effect. But the magic inner music of Shakespeare's *Tempest* or Goethe's *Faust* are bound to the English and to the German word. Internationality is impossible for lyrics. A Frenchman or Italian can no more conceive what Mörike or Hölderlin mean to German speech and the German spirit, than a German can penetrate through a translation, however good, to the inner spirit, to the finest in Verlaine or Swinburne. These are the real barriers between nations, to be overcome only by a complete mastery of the language. There are certain "untranslatable" things.



Is anything untranslatable in music? Are there insurmountable barriers here also, between nations? National treasures which are not only banned, but whose very nature makes it impossible to export? International music is a bogey, but is there a supranational, a universal music?

Since I am supposed to be a historian, I will try to make a historical approach to the solution of this problem. Much of what I say will appear paradoxical, but consider if there really is a paradox. Nationalism has tinged the histories of individual

peoples, and in the same way, consciously or unconsciously, has distorted and falsified the history of national music. It might be better to talk no more of German, Italian, French or English music history, but rather of the history of music in Germany, Italy, France or England. None of these developments flowered in complete isolation, no matter how earnestly one may wish to present the history of music as completely and exclusively autochthonous.

The nationalistic writing of music history persists even today. For example, there is a desire to eliminate such well-beloved figures as Isaac, Willaert, Rore, Lasso from the history of Italian music in the sixteenth century, because they were Netherlanders, "foreigners," not recognizing the great triumph of the Italian spirit which compelled these men to create Italian music and so pave the way for national Italian art. Or, not to confine the examples to Fascist countries, take Debussy's attempt to eliminate Gluck, Beethoven and Wagner from French music. Even in England Handel has lost historical significance and it is not only because the spirit of the time is unfavorable to his music.



To assert that there has ever been a "universal," that is, a European music, would be rash. The word makes an unreasonable claim since, from the outset, systems of music which do not fit into the historical picture of Western civilization are excluded—music of the Near and Far East, not to speak of Africa. But even within these limits there is no unity. Not even in the Middle Ages, which we like to consider as a period of cultural and spiritual unity. In the Middle Ages, first French, then Burgundian art dominated music. But "dialects" were heard everywhere—English, Italian, German. What we call the proto-renaissance, the Italian Trecento, represents nothing more than a weakening of the dominant, if not universal, French art. In the sixteenth century the complete separation of nations begins. But there is nothing less than a Babel-like confusion of musical tongues, there is no musical Volapük or Esperanto, they understand each other and exchange phrases. Was Palestrina an Italian composer? Yes and no. By birth Italian, according to his style he was at least

as much Netherlander. Was Lasso a Netherlander? He was a personality of universal greatness, who ruled the Netherlandic, Italian, French and German with equal mastery, but from the standpoint of musical history he belongs exclusively to the Italian circle, he is, a thousandfold, Italian.

It was only in the seventeenth century that national contrasts became sharp, so much so that Italian and French music seemed impossible of union, irreconcilable (although they could naturally be grouped under a larger least-common-denominator) and the Florentine Lulli became J. B. Lully and founded a specifically French music. But there were exceptions. The English madrigal, which developed in slavish imitation and was apparently only an Italian madrigal with English text, was yet a high spot in English music history and, like Shakespeare's dramas—*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *As You Like It*—belonged to the whole world.

In the eighteenth century the conflict is intensified. Italian music enters upon a dominance against which France can hardly assert itself; but the best Italian Trio-Sonatas, shortly before the dawn of the century, are written by Henry Purcell, and the finest Italian operas and oratorios (the latter with English text) are turned out by a barber's son from Halle who achieved a foot-hold in London—George Frederick Handel.

And what about Bach? What is there German in Bach except that his church service cantatas are written on grandiloquent texts by local German poets? His style was nourished from the sources of all national music—German, Italian, French. It would be hard to say what is German in Bach the musician. It should be remembered as a warning, that the great Bach Edition includes several sonatas by an Italian (Bonpartii) which were generally accepted as Bach's. Bach would be termed an eclectic were he not of such great stature. He soars away from the personal over the nations, into the empyrean. He does not write universal music but Bach music. German music did not form him, it was he who formed German music, but only—tragic jest—a hundred or a hundred and fifty years after his death.

The case of other great musicians is no different. What about Gluck who—as our quotation shows—has fared so well against

the prejudices of nationalism. In both his creative aspects, he never slipped from the frame of Italian and French opera, and his so-called reform only created an epoch (if it was epoch-making, for the problem of opera still remained unsolved after him) because he was Gluck, the mighty personality Gluck.

How about Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven? If ever a musician made a complete conquest of Germany, France and England, it was Haydn. There is no point to the ridiculous question, whether his great-grandmother was Croatian or a real Swabian, and it would be hard to say where he was best appreciated, in Vienna, Paris or London. But there is sure and documentary proof that he was least understood in Berlin. All his life Mozart fluctuated between German and Italian music, and it is only a personal idiosyncrasy that he, the spirit of imitation, could not bear French music. But his music is in no sense a synthesis of Italian and German styles. (Synthesis is a word generally used where intelligence fails). His case is like that of Bach. His greatness conquered the world of music, which ever afterwards bore a permanent Mozartian impress. And similarly, since Schubert, the world of music has become not lower Austrian, but Schubertian. Since Chopin, it has been not Polish but Chopinesque, because, though Chopin sometimes wrote Polish music, it was mostly good, fascinating compelling music.



Beethoven is hailed as the musician of revolution, of the proclamation of the rights of man, of world citizenship. As a matter of fact, he is all that; and, moreover, a North German, a real Fleming, but also a Viennese. He is a disciple of Philipp Emanuel Bach, but also of Haydn, Mozart, Cherubini and Salieri. He is the man of destiny who transforms the meaning of the word "music" and passes it on to the fateful nineteenth century. He stands as a personality against the world; all his works are spiritually surcharged with drama; and the world, surcharged with drama too, understands him. He speaks as a prompter and as a solitary figure to all, and all hang on his words. In this respect one might call his music universal, and the term might pass. But it is forcing matters to distinguish between the "humanity-

embracing" tendency of some of his works—*Fidelio* or the *Fifth* and *Ninth Symphonies*—and the drama of the language which is identified with his personality. Is this universal too? Is not a piano concerto by Mozart or a fugue by Bach more universal, if we may use the comparative degree of this expression?



I will touch only briefly on the nineteenth century, no matter how fascinating it might be to study all its musical figures for their mixture of the national and universal—Weber, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Smetana, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Bruckner, and the rest. But two errors about Wagner and Liszt must be corrected. Wagner is generally accepted as the most extremely nationalistic German musician, forcing all nations under the yoke of Germanism against which they sooner or later rebelled. Liszt is considered the typical "international," impotent because he did not know where he belonged.

Let us not, in the case of Wagner, confuse the picture he wished to create in his letters and manifestoes with what he really was. France understood him first, and despite the *Tannhäuser* furore, as an artist he has always received a better evaluation there than in Germany. His influence in England and France has been specifically French and English. He was the true European musician, because his style was the most personal, and it is essentially immaterial whether one accepts this style as German (certainly not as Germanic) or as Jewish. (Because it is childishly easy to interpret Wagner's music as Jewish.)

Liszt, on the contrary, born of German parents in Hungary and taken at an early age on virtuoso tours to every part of the Continent, who, as a man, is a real citizen of the world, belongs, as a musician, with all his works, to French history, beside Chopin, Berlioz, and even Gounod. To acclaim him as a "national" composer of Germany or Hungary only betrays confusion about what constitutes a style.



The so-called "New Music," the music that one does not want to hear today because it offers difficulties, is despised and persecuted as "international" because the "national" now has the



upper hand. But, to repeat, there is no international music in the sense of a Volapük or Esperanto and there never has been. Even the festivals of the International Society for Contemporary Music have not been able to foster such music because it never was available. On the contrary, I have always regarded these meetings as orgies of nationalism, in which even the smallest musical nations received excessive consideration. It is true that for simple souls, the "new music" might create the impression of leveling out national differences, so that one could hardly tell an Englishman from a Serbian, or a Bolivian from a Frenchman. (Of course, they can always tell the difference between an Aryan and a Jewish musician in Germany.) But this is because the "new music" has a style of its own, not yet generally current, which is no more leveling than the Mozartian style of the eighteenth century, or Mendelssohn's in the decade from 1850 to 1860. The negations of the "new music" are generally prevalent, the negation of Wagner and romanticism, of lyricizing classicism. Just as common is its predilection for old classical forms and means. The "new music" favors the constructive, even the abstract. The application of the twelve-tone system, of linearity, seems to be a formula, and, in fact, these are dangers that its followers face. But there is no danger where the personality is so great, so compelling, that he transcends the style of the age and of national boundaries. Why has Ferruccio Busoni become only, so to speak, an amiable patron saint of the "new music" and not its great representative? Not because he stood between the nations—his mother was German and his father Italian—but because he was not strong enough to compel unity between the virtuoso, the Lisztian side of his natural disposition and the half that belonged to Bach and Mozart. He was not only not enough of an Italian or German, but he was not Busoni enough.

There is—let it be said again, and in conclusion—no "international music." And there is "universal music" only when a great man and great musician transcends his nation to fashion the world after his own image.