

VIEWING LES NOCES IN 1929

RICHARD HAMMOND

PERIODICALLY in the history of music criticism there recurs the question of whether the artist is the product of his race, or the art of the race the creation of its artists. Separate these hypotheses and they are meaningless; together, they form one of those paradoxes that arrive at truth. To the distress of the nationalists, the decision is never made for it could never be final or of any significance.

In his remarkable guide-book, *An Outline to Les Noces*, just published by the Oxford University Press, Victor Belaiev has given us a thorough and excellent analysis of the musical materials in that great score, wherein he is at great pains to tabulate the racial elements of the work. After a brief summary of Russian musical history and of the development of the "liberation from Europe" tendency; followed by a detailed study of the folk-melos employed in *Noces*, the thematism, the non-European character of rhythm, harmony, counterpoint and instrumentation, he progresses to the conclusion that the work is "one of the supreme attainments" of modern art because, in content, it "marks the completion of a new stage in the forward movement and development of Russian national music."

While all these indicia of racial origin which Mr. Belaiev has adduced from the score are logical and interesting enough, surely the final dictum is unconvincing. If *Les Noces* is one of the supreme products of the music of today, one might venture to believe that it owes its importance to some character that lifts it out of the current of the "new nations in music" movement. Founded on folk-song and folk tradition, it is obviously (not merely to the student's eye), racial, but it is likewise pure Stravinsky. It is not Russian in the sense that the music of De Falla and Albeniz is



LES NOCES—Costume designs for the Bride by SERGEI SOUDEIKIN



Spanish, for there the nationality seems to predominate, to dictate, nor is it even so thoroughly localized as Stravinsky's own *Petrouchka*, with its more conventional, though superb handling of the folk idiom. While essentially Russian, *Les Noces* is at the same time outstandingly the personal creation of its composer. Of the whole galaxy of masterpieces written before and after, it is foremost in invention, freedom and originality.

Six years after its first production by Diaghilev, *Les Noces* is to be staged in America. The impending performance and the timely appearance of Mr. Belaiev's book give us a moment's pause to reconsider the place of this remarkable achievement, both in relation to Stravinsky's art and to the whole contemporary scene.

The glowing, mordant and brutal pages of *The Fire Bird*, *Petrouchka*, and the *Sacre* are the heritage of a great orchestral tradition. In these works the orchestra, as a single instrument of myriad timbres, has been employed to ultimate capacity of color and shading. Having played thereon with devastating virtuosity, the conjurer and artist in Stravinsky cried *Finis*. The cloak of tonal opulence is discarded and he appears in the chaste mantle of the classic. Boris de Schloezer has pointed out that this moment marks a reversion to the pre-Beethoven conception of the orchestra as an aggregation of separate timbres rather than as a super-organ of limitless hues. Despite their pungency, the earlier works were still in the line of their antecedents. The later scores, though markedly personal, make a deferential gesture toward the classics. Because of the restrictions that Stravinsky has placed upon himself, the *Octuor*, the *Symphonies pour Vent*, the *Piano Concerto*, *Apollon*, are rescued from a certain effect of poverty only through outstanding technique and invention.

In *Noces* we find music born anew, fresh in vigor and unfettered. With his genius for adapting the means to the particular end, Stravinsky set aside the more extravagant equipment of the large orchestra, and finding the chamber ensemble inadequate to his needs, he invented an instrumentation wherein the chorus serves as "orchestra" against a background of four pianos and percussion. Through this extraordinary medium he presents to us the age old customs of the nuptial rites—the preparation of

the bride, the anointing of the bridegroom, the departure of the bride to the lamentation of the parents, and the wedding feast with its final achievement of the ritual.

The score is unlike any work preceding it, and defies comparison or even analogy. Its treatment is more that of the cantata than the ballet; rarely anecdotal, the music seems to generate the dramatic action from its own life. Totally abstract it is yet highly poignant. The chorus relates the narrative or rather unfolds it; the personal emotion of romanticism is seldom encountered. The very words of the text with their curious repetitions and their non-senseless sequence are present to give sound value rather than to convey feeling or logical significance. The indicated action is stylized, symbolic, and yet there is a directness, a depth of utterance, a tragic simplicity unequalled even in the Olympian pages of the *Sacre*.

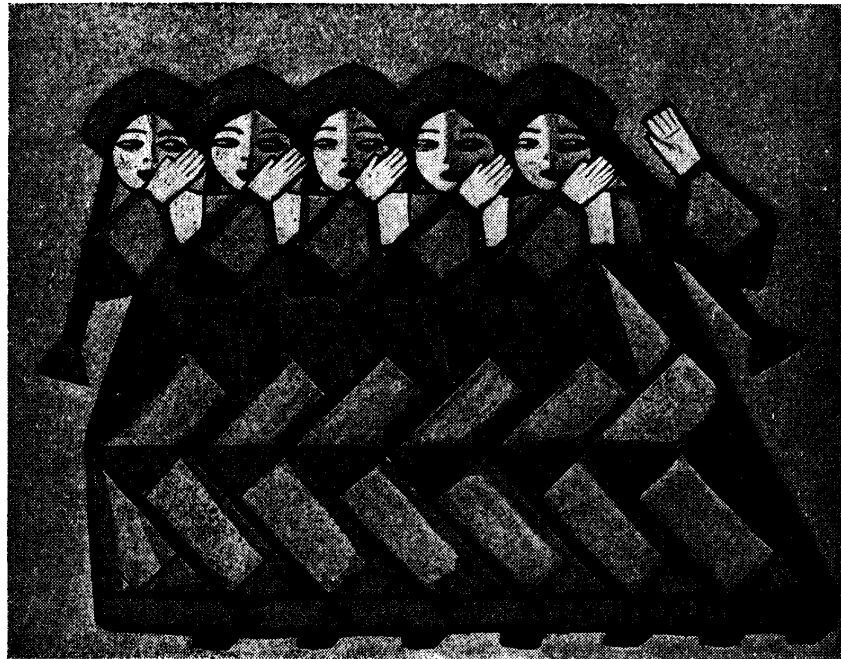
The musical substance of *Les Noces* is derived, as Belaiev has so exhaustively demonstrated, from the folk-melos of the Russian people. The short two and three measure phrases are woven into a tonal fabric essentially monodic, and yet the product of a complex and unusual vocal polyphony. The pianos and percussion serve almost entirely to add color and edge; they give background to the choral orchestra, as is so often evident in their prolonged ostinati. The polyphony of the score shows in marked contradistinction to that of other European composers. Themes are evolved through it, by a system of adding or budding (so excellently illustrated in the *Outline*). A theme originating as counterpoint to another previously established, will achieve an eventual independence and in counterpoint therewith, still others will develop, whereas in ordinary polyphony when two themes are joined together they are usually matured and independent. The harmony, although definitely tonal, is far removed from that of other works in the same epoch, through its basis in folk music, its use of scales alien to European music, new cadences and a jumping from register to register in the harmonic sequence. Foreign notes serve to enrich tonal chords and do not form the basis of new harmonies.

Rhythm, always so fascinating in Stravinsky, achieves a freedom in *Les Noces* beyond that in any other score. The accents,

the direct product of the folk-melos employed, are disposed without regard to bar-line, thereby removing from rhythm its usual periodic repetition of equi-metrical structures. The bar-lines, as Belaiev has pointed out, are stakes that mark the movement of the tonal current, but do not indicate the rhythm of this movement. The folk-melos is thus seen to be a controlling factor in the warp and woof of the tapestry itself, not the usual "added" pigment to give color.

The production of *Les Noces* made by Diaghilev in Europe, and that proposed for the League of Composers' performance at the end of April are at once similar and dissimilar, reflecting in their variety the richness of material in the music. The effectively simple décors of Gontcharova gave chief emphasis to the cosmic significance of the work. The plan of Soudeikine and his associates is based in every detail on peasant life, but the total structure builds up an abstract dynamic design. The famous "black and white" conception of Diaghilev was a projection in two dimensions, remote, abstract. Soudeikine's forms are of blocks, carved like wood in peasant hands, painted with the colors of rural peasant life.

Les Noces is not only the work of greatest originality in its composer's entire output, but it is also alone, of recent contemporary productions, unhampered by influence. Prokofieff's gigantically brutal *Pas d'Acier* is still in the direct line of Stravinsky and his predecessors, for all its relation to the machine age; it is almost a *Sacre Mécanique*. The music of Hindemith, brimming with youth, energy and new devices is yet too sheltered in the academic shade to achieve complete freedom. The genius of the master mathematician, Schönberg, is so walled round by theory as to remain forever removed from the free air of invention and emotion. *Les Noces* towers alone, a conception purely creative, throbbingly racial, and, to its slightest vocal phrase or harmonic juxtaposition, Stravinsky's. It is hewn from the rough wood of the folk-melos, cut in the abstract design of the symbolic, colored in poignant human emotion—emotion that will be co-existent with this strange pagan-Christian-animal rite as long as there remain human love and physical impulse.



Two Studies for LES NOCES
by SERGEI SOUDEIKINE.

Above—The matchmaker ;
Below—Group of young girls.

RACE AND REVOLUTION

LAZARE SAMINSKY

THAT race is a controlling force in art is one of those general truisms that are universally accepted, but as universally open to misconstruction. A popular and persistent prejudice today holds that race is a stronghold of reaction. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, as a simple examination of the progress of modern music will disclose.

The three races whose individual characteristics have been least affected by their European environment are the Velikorossy or Great Russians (the people of Glinka and Moussorgsky, not of Tchaikovsky and Borodin), the Hungarians and the Jews. And it is just from these three that the musical revolution of the twentieth century has received its greatest impetus, through the contributions of Scriabin, Schönberg, Stravinsky, Bartok, Milhaud and Prokofieff.

Their race, not their nationality, fanned the revolutionary ardor of these composers. Generated in their blood, it was not nurtured in the well-trimmed and level pastures of civilized art, in the cultural psychology of their countries, but it overstepped and broke through the barriers of their national environment.

From the very start of their careers, Stravinsky, Prokofieff and Bartok, whose racial impulse is vigorous and clearly obvious, show the unmistakable signs of struggle against their heritage, against a mode of expression reflecting their local culture. The power of this inner racial impulse determines the outcome of the conflict and, as their gifts reach maturity, we see it triumph over the civilizations that nursed their genius. In the *Sacre*, in Prokofieff's *Scythian Suite*, and in Bartok's *Piano Concerto*, we witness this victory. Here the sources destructive to inherited cultural