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MODERN MUSIC

THE RENAISSANCE OF CHORAL MUSIC

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METEOROLOGISTS are infallible only when they discuss yesterday's weather. When they predict they occasionally err. To be a musical "weather expert" and foresee variations in esthetic "climatics," is an ambitious undertaking, full of snares, likely to result only in discrediting the critic and emphasizing the weakness of human prophecies. But without posing as an augur, one may attempt to make some synthesis of the present and the immediate past, even though it is impossible to withdraw to a distance permitting general survey. After a period of quiescence, the composition and performance of symphonic works with choral elements, or choral works with instrumental accompaniment, has again become popular. This renaissance of symphonic choral song, especially marked between 1920 and 1930, is perhaps due to the psychologic state of musicians and audiences, but there are also economic factors. Before studying this renaissance and the reasons for its sudden flowering, let us briefly trace the significant features of the history of choral works.

Music was born with man; his song is melody; his step, his gait, the beating of his hands, rhythm. Nothing is more fundamental than the human voice with its many inflections, its ranges, its timbres—varying with every race and individual—, its direct and emotional effect on other humans. The vocal phenomenon, easily produced despite its complex mechanism, does not imitate nature. It is a demonstration that music is *naturally* within man. Song was an integral part of the early life of the race, an accom-

paniment to incantations and liturgies, to sacred or profane dances. (Rhythm's place is also fundamental, as is attested by the use of percussive instruments, the infinite variety of drums from the very first civilization.)

Music may be of divine order, un-mundane, of magic origin, but undeniably its most natural expression—because the most human—is song, and its most social expression is the song of a group. This conceded, let us investigate certain phases of choral activity, leaving the theatre at the point where the chorus probably had its origin and where its place remained essential, but which is not within the scope of this study.

The ancient Greeks made a cult of the choral song; the return of a victorious athlete to his country was the occasion for great choral competitions in which thousands participated. Rising Christianity, though hostile to all pagan memories, perpetuated the choral ensemble by the practice of the Gregorian chant in which, according to certain commentators, all the faithful who met in the ceremony participated. It was inevitable that the sacred polyphony of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, whose tradition was guarded by the monks, should have led Luther to ponder the importance of music in religious practice. With prevision he gave it also an educational role, really social. The Lutheran hymn has indeed definitely developed both the taste for ensemble song and the necessity of meeting for group singing. Wherever the Reformation flourished, a strong choral tradition was established—in Holland, Germany and England. From another angle, studying the origins of jazz, we can trace the spirituals of the American Negroes, natives of Africa, to the influence of the Protestant hymns of the first missionaries. The way Handel, Bach (except in his lay cantatas, like *Café*), Mozart, and later, Liszt, Brückner and Franck used the choral element, derives from religious forms if not religious subjects. This tendency having re-appeared today, we may find here an explanation of the hidden reasons for the renaissance that we are studying.

Haydn, composer of *The Seasons,* Beethoven, in spite of his *Missa Solennis*—more ornamental than orthodox—and rather because of his *Ode to Joy,* Schumann, Berlioz, Mahler, made

the chorus primarily the interpreter of the human, of a philosophic, even pantheistic idea. We should include here the cult of the orpheon (a male *a capella* chorus) which flourished in Germany and, about 1840-50, was spread through Brussels and perhaps the north of France by the professors (of German origin) of the Brussels Conservatory. In the same period appear the first attempts at vocal instrumentation, mentioned by A. Elwart in his *Petit Traité d'Instrumentation,* namely a double chorus, the first part using words, the second, *à bouche fermée;* or else entirely vocalized. He notes some original works for such an ensemble (notably by Chelard 1860), as well as pieces transcribed for chorus without words like the overtures to the *Magic Flute* and *Der Freischütz.* Verdi uses an identical method (chromatic scales *à bouche fermée* by the off-stage chorus) but it is not until the *Sirènes* of Debussy, the third of the *Nocturnes* of 1899, that we find a symphonic example of vocal instrumentation, that is, the use in the orchestra of the voice as a pure timbre, on the same basis as a horn or a clarinet. Ravel develops the process in *Daphnis et Chloé* (1911) and introduces a veritable human organ (chords of seven voices) into the powerful polyphony of the finale. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the birth of Schönberg's *Gurrelieder*; Florent Schmitt's great fresco, *Psalm XLVII* (1904), and various oratorios by Pierné, who gave us the popular *Croisade des Enfants.*

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But really, this activity had been clearly hampered, the basic reason therefor being one of esthetics. For two centuries rich in genius, Germany enjoyed complete musical hegemony, but the nineteenth century saw the shifting of the focal point of musical creation, and France became the center for the new orientation of tonal ideas. Romain Rolland, about 1905, wrote that French music had quietly taken the place of German music. Franck, Duparc, Chausson, d'Indy, on one hand, and Gounod, Bizet, Massenet, Chabrier, on the other, paved the way for the revival in 1900 which gave us that wonderful galaxy, Fauré, Debussy, Dukas, Ravel, Schmitt, and Roussel. This school, which with

the "Five" Russians, formed the *avant-garde,* and served as a model to practically the whole world, reacted against Wagner and against the German tradition, its set forms of symphony and classic oratorio, and went back chiefly to the sources of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France. The *Sonates* by Debussy, for example are closer to Rameau than to Beethoven, and Ravel certainly owes something to Couperin. Furthermore, the short instrumental or vocal piece began to flourish in opposition to the symphony. The oratorio of this period is easily forgotten, in spite of the *Chant de la Cloche* by d'Indy (who is the most traditional of the French composers), in spite of the finale of the *Evocations* (1911) by Roussel, whose episodic choruses form an element more descriptive than structural. Imitators followed the example of Debussy and Ravel, who never wrote a choral work. (The choruses of the *Martyre de St. Sébastien* are related to the theatre, though it is true that Debussy treated them rather symphonically. His unfinished *Ode à la France* (1917) is a sort of ballade, the result of war conditions.)

It was from the younger generation that the new esthetic impulse arose for the revival of the great choral form. With *Le Sacre*—the liberator—Stravinsky broke the spell of impressionism. A new school appeared: the Six; then other young composers validated the movement. Stravinsky wrote *Les Noces* between 1914 and 1917 but its definitive form dates from 1923. Darius Milhaud tried Eschylus' *Orestes,* with a translation by Paul Claudel, and successively put the three parts of the trilogy to music, *Agamemnon* (1913), *Les Choéphores* (1915-16), *Les Eumenides* (1917-1922). A complete performance is still to take place. About 1913 Milhaud experienced a great admiration for Albéric Magnard, and we might ask whether his taste for the choral form, referred back through this admiration, is not a distant homage to César Franck, paradoxical as this may appear and quite apart from the question of influence.

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After the armistice, about 1920, the movement became still more clear. In 1921 Honegger wrote his dramatic psalm, *Le*

Roi David, for the Jorat theatre. After an incomplete Paris performance that year, the final creation, in 1924, may be said to mark a noteworthy date in the history of the oratorio. Not in a long time has a work of such strength made a deeper impression on the public or gained the approval of both the initiates and the crowd. Its success was tremendous. In a few months *Le Roi David* made a tour of the world and aroused enthusiasm everywhere. This triumph is partly due to a psychologic situation. Music lovers, after a surfeit of tonal refinement, tired of too fine-spun harmonies, of little anemic pieces, longed for a hearty work which could infuse new blood into an art that, since post-Debussyism, seemed about to perish through its very graces. *Le Roi David,* which boldly proclaims perfect harmony between the group of singers and the whole orchestra, with magnificient brusquerie swept out all those little museum pieces "esthetically" displayed under glass. Here is a definite tendency; a desire to return to the great forms as a reaction from the French school of 1900 and its imitators, who had abandoned them, but also, perhaps, as a reaction against certain expressions of Schönberg (*Pierrot Lunaire*) and of Stravinsky (*Rossignol*) which their epigones had reduced to sterile clichés. The movement was freed from restraint.

The same year, 1924, Schmitt's *Psaume* was put back on the programs with great success, after a lapse of ten years. The choral renaissance was strongly supported by the public. But the expenses incident to the execution of such works had temporarily eliminated them from the musical scene. With the resumption of normal life, budgets again permitted performances. In 1924, André Caplet produced his *Miroir de Jésus* for women's voices, strings and harps, an essentially "Catholic" work, marked by tenderness and naive faith. Honegger remains faithful to the Old Testament and gives us *Judith* (1925), the oratorio version becoming quickly popular. The *Psalmus Hungaricus* of Kodaly is based on a sixteenth century interpretation of Psalm LV by the pastor Michael Veg. The quite popular style, by its breadth, does, in a certain sense, recall that of *Le Roi David,* though it is less developed. The *Litanies* of the Austrian, Petyrek, who lives in solitude in Abazzia, are much more typical, with their

men's, women's and children's choruses and their extraordinary instrumentation, which one might call biblical—trumpets, harps, bells, glockenspiel, drums, kettle drums. The rather thin musical substance is quite originally worked up and certain dialogs between murmuring voices and trumpets, underlined by the grumbling kettle drums, produce a great effect.

Stravinsky's *Noces,* revealed in 1923, is more musical than religious. It is one of the most unusual works of the period. The score, which quite faithfully follows the Russian text, develops two elemental forms of expression of the art of sound: song, the natural instrument, employed by the choruses and the soloists, and rhythm, relying on four pianos and an important percussion ensemble. *Les Noces* is a primitive spectacle par excellence. *Oedipus Rex* (1927), the opera-oratorio, endeavors by the use of a Latin text to attain a sort of general effect, a kind of de-personalization, and at the same time, to create a certain typical form. Stravinsky also chose three Latin psalms for his *Symphonie des Psaumes* (1930) intimately combining an orchestral and a choral form, as the title indicates. The orchestra, strengthened by numerous wood instruments and two pianos, does not include violas or violins, the clear and piercing instruments which ordinarily give us the *melos.* The chorus, in a way, substitutes for them, introducing a lyric element while retaining a symphonic function. The method is quite marked in the second movement, in a double fugue, one part given to the orchestra, the other to the voices. From the Stravinskian circle have come other works with chorus written by Russians; *Cantate* (1930) by Markevitch, also on a Latin text; *Ode* by Nabokoff, presented as a ballet by Diaghilev in 1928; *Sonate Liturgique* (1930) by Lourié, for piano, three contrabasses, woods and women's voices, the latter employed like instruments. Four effective chants make up this score, two without words, two based on liturgic texts.

The *Symphonie des Psaumes* is inscribed: "For the glory of God," but Nabokoff writes this legend at the head of his *Ode*: "Meditation on the Majesty of God on seeing the great aurora borealis." It seems clear that the use of the choral mass corresponds frequently to some religious idea, to an act of faith. But how express this faith if not by a liturgic text, which has that

definite purpose? And for a sacred text, is not the singing word the most direct support? This relationship is strengthened by numerous examples which may be added to those already mentioned of Honegger, Caplet, Kodaly and Petyrek. To confirm this choral renaissance, Szymanowsky gives us his *Stabat Mater;* the American, T. Spelman, *Litanies* and a mythological work whose text sings the praise of Venus, *Pervigilium Veneris* (1929); Saminsky composes a *Requiem* and the *Litanies of Women*; the Fleming, Herberigs, is not afraid to introduce the tonal refinement of the Debussyan school into his *Messe*; the Belgian, Raymond Moukaert, professor in the Brussels Conservatory and composer of some remarkable *Lieder,* has attempted a *Vie de Saint Paul;* his young compatriot, Robert Choussier, was applauded at Königsberg for his *Trilogia Sacra* to a text by Rilka. In Germany, where the classical oratorio has never been eclipsed (despite the recent utilitarian tendency which I will discuss later) there is no shortage of works of sacred inspiration. Among others, Kaminski has written a *Magnificat;* the *Antiennes* of the young Wolfgang Fortner, certain religious passages of Braunfels, composer of a *Te Deum,* maintain the polyphony of Reger, whose influence the other side of the Rhine has never ceased. England, long fascinated by the oratorios of Handel and Mendelssohn had never abandoned this style and has particularly developed it since its renaissance. After his *Hymn of Jesus,* Holst gave us several *Motets*; Vaughan Williams a *Benedicite.*

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When we come to the Frenchman, Albert Roussel, we find that he does not really follow the movement. After writing the *Poème de la Forêt,* having lovingly touched on the drama of the insects (*Le Festin de l'Araignée*), after creating three tonal frescos of India (*Evocations*) and transposing to the present their mysterious religion (*Padmâvatî*), this determined pantheist also attacked the religious style. But this point requires closer examination. His *Psaume LXXX,* which had such a great success at the Oxford International Festival, despite its fire, its elevated thought, the fervor and gentleness of the last chorus, seemed in-

spired by the spectacle of the faith rather than by this faith itself. It is above all the plasticity of the biblical text (*Parabole de la Vigne*) that the composer delighted in expressing; the work, like Schmitt's *Psaume,* is of religious inspiration but it is not religious (which has nothing to do with its musical quality) and therefore is opposed to the *Miroir de Jésus,* for example, to the *Symphonie des Psaumes* or to Honegger's *Cantiques de Pâques.* On the other hand Honegger, one of the builders of the choral renaissance, exhibits a similar tendency in *David* and *Judith.* These are, of course, works of an essentially religious feeling; but the dramatic action plays a role equal to the act of faith, and sometimes greater. Their choruses certainly express feelings of piety, but these are primarily the spirit of the raging mob (as in *Boris Godunow*). The exulting *Dance before the Ark* in *David* (which is a dramatic psalm), the tumultuous *Cantique de Bataille,* the savage *Cantique de Victoire* in *Judith* (called musical action), introduce into an ensemble dominated by faith, elements which are really human. It may be claimed that this is definitely biblical. Perhaps, yet it is the human note that gives the tone to these scores and also to *L'Impératrice aux Rochers* (dramatic music with chorus). Vaughan Williams' *The Shepherds, La Mort d'Oedipe* by the Swiss, Conrad Beck, fall into the crowded class of works whose religion is colored by their humanity.

In *Amphion* (1928) and especially in the praiseworthy *Antigone,* where, however, the gods dominate the action, Honegger gave the choruses such an important role, made them so exigent in their movement, that it is difficult to talk in this case of mysticism, so much does humanity seem to be the center of the conception. We even see Holst borrowing the text of his *Symphonie Chorale* (1925) from the pagan poems of Keats and for his *Ode to Death,* the verses of Walt Whitman. The choral-ballet, the *Golden Goose,* frankly humorous, and the *Rio Grande* (chorus, piano and orchestra) in which the young Constant Lambert investigates jazz rhythms, *Le Chant de Folie* (1904) by Ibert, belong to the domain of the profane. In *Cris du Monde* (1931) Honegger deals with the human problem to its fullest extent, utilizing the significant poem of René Bizet: Man facing his destiny, lured by the factory, by the sun he cannot see, the distant

seas, the unknown regions, and, dragged into the daily whirlwind, the clamor of the radio, the movies, the dance halls..... cries of the world. The Parisian public gave a lukewarm, polite, reception to this powerfully moving score, to the tremendous effort of its composer. Did it not feel that the cries of the crowd in this choral mass were its own? A collective soul perhaps would have been necessary for the grasp of this "integral humanness," a really new contribution from the composer of *Pacific.*

Other nations will understand it better, especially in relation to the most recent German tendencies, represented by Weill who is becoming the center of a group of young volunteers, creating according to the rhythms of the new democracies. It is the new objectivity, *Gebrauchsmusik,* which animates the avant-garde, who seek a musical expression corresponding to the collective forms toward which the new generations are moving. Thus, concert music is regarded as a painting in a museum—it is dead. With the avant-garde, it is a primary necessity to make a social unit of the art, to reinstate music into life, to make it circulate like a vehiculary language commingled with daily activities. The perfect instrument to meet this necessity is the chorus, a voluntary getting-together under the compulsion of a mutual objective. A series of works have been produced which are intended to stir amateurs, inactive audiences, to associate themselves with musical expression. Hugo Hermann has written *Seventeen Etudes for Chorus for the Modern Choral School,* of progressively increasing difficulty, going from simple *parlando* to *bel canto,* from homophony to polyphony. The *Lehrstücke,* intended for children, despite their simplicity introduce complicated scales that the young performers handle as facilely as the traditional major-minor. *The Black Sheep* by Paul Höffer, *The Railroad Game* by Paul Dessau, *We Build a City* by Hindemith are typical examples of Lehrstücke, which, with their chorus in dialog with an older person as "leader," recall the Middle Age moralities. Such experiments have been presented at Baden-Baden by the Neue Musik group.

Finally, the spoken chorus—an echo from the theatre of antiquity—which Milhaud has already strikingly used in *Choéphores,* is spreading more and more through Germany. In *To-*

tenmal, by Talhoff, the psalmodized chorus, reinforced by gong and percussion, is united with the dance and the playing of a color organ, an impulse toward a common prayer giving the impression of a great stained glass window in a church.

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In short, the period from 1920 to 1930 reveals in France a choral renaissance which is due to the reaction of the new generation against the ban placed on this form of art by the school of 1900-1910, but a renaissance affected by economic factors. In England, the oratorio which had never ceased to be cultivated, developed quite naturally when the national musical revival took place (around 1910-1920), though often in a secular direction. In Germany, a style still vital in classical form received a new impetus, the chorus with a social function as a reaction against individual romanticism. These are material facts. As tendencies, we find, to a great extent, at the extreme right, a large production of works dictated by faith or religious inspiration; at the extreme left, the introduction into musical phenomena of man, of his social system; the center reveals scores tinged with pantheistic poetry, equidistant from mysticism and humanism. The facts having been cited, an explanation may be found by showing that they correspond, quite definitely, to the esthetics, to the economic realities, to the moral aspirations, and to the politics of the day.

1. The fundamental impulse to reaction is confirmed by the progress of the "return to the past" movement, that is to the balance between form and substance (as in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), a return foreseen by Debussy, invited by Ravel (*Tombeau de Couperin*), and effected in France by Stravinsky, Roussel and several young composers.

2. Despite the impulse of this "return," the fears of organizations faced by deficits have restrained the choral enthusiasm, and few composers will lightly create a score which it is improbable will be performed. The end of the war gave us a ray of hope, but the experiment of *Roi David* was attempted only thanks to the bold vision of a music-loving banker transformed by circumstances into a responsible impresario, ready for any

sacrifice. Success was not expected and Honegger felt the great importance of the triumph to such an extent that he said later: "Here is a work of a style austere, not to say wearying, which attracts the crowd. There is then still a public which loves music." The choral renaissance gives these words prophetic significance.

3. Indisputably the butcheries of the war and the moral upheaval which followed brought on a resurgence of mystical faith to which the flowering of religious music corresponds. The Christ-spirit, neo-Thomism, the writings of Maritain which influenced some striking conversions in the literary world (perhaps more esthetic than spiritual) the growing practice around 1900 of common prayer in the ateliers of the artists, due to various reasons, and which Duhamel has put on the stage in his *L'Oeuvre des Athlètes*; all these are proofs that musical creation, in at least one of its aspects, is becoming a function of the life of the people.

4. On the other hand, the same interdependence of artistic and social expression justifies the experiments with new democratic ideas, whose success in Germany indicates their pertinence.

5. In general, the emphasis of the human note in music is dependent on a wider situation which painting, so often in advance of the other arts, has already for some time revealed (in the return to the faithful portrait, the tendency to put man at the center of creation).

A conclusion emerges from these facts. I shall not try to form a theory of convenience where we should only make assumptions. Yet it does not seem unduly bold to predict an orientation toward solidarity. Among the multifarious expressions which it embraces, especially in the arts, there is none more elemental, more human, of a greater spiritual height than the choral song whose renaissance seems now assured, whose place is wherever men meet, in the sports stadia, in singing societies, factories, schools, theatres, temples; choral song, which gave glory to ancient spectacles and exalted our medieval theatres, which can animate a thousand breasts with the same breath, a unit peaceful and disciplined, to attain a common ideal, a future order—perhaps the new Middle Ages.