

THE NEW APOLLO

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IN the spring of 1927 the Library of Congress in Washington, negotiated with Stravinsky for a small ballet to be ready for production at Mrs. Frederic Coolidge's festival in April 1928. True to his proverbial preciseness, Stravinsky inquired for specific details: the exact dimensions of the stage and those of the orchestra pit. The Library suggested that he use not more than five characters to appear on the stage; the composer has used but four. He has scored his work for strings alone—twenty-five of them: twelve violins, four violas, six celli and three double-basses.

In *Apollo Musagètes* Stravinsky has evidently desired to revive the spirit of the classic French ballet, the ballet which, with modifications, had supreme sway in Europe from the days of Lulli and Rameau until the advent of Isadora Duncan. Here we have the familiar mythological characters, reminding us that the Florentines who originated the opera and the ballet as we know them had in their minds the resuscitation of the true Grecian drama. We have Apollo, Leader of the Muses, doubly resplendent because of the fact that he is both Greek and French, that his *cuirasse* is that of the Grecian god, his *perruque* that of the *Roi Soleil*. We have the three Muses, Calliope, Polymnia and Terpsichore, suggesting, in their arm-bands and their golden fillets, Mount Parnassus, in their pale bodices and their drooping tulle skirts, the Académie Nationale. We have a ballet divided into two scenes (a *Ballet d'Action*, it was called), each scene composed of a series of separate numbers: *Variations*, *Pas de Deux*, *Pas d'Action*, ensemble numbers for all the dancers and the whole closing with the customary *Apotheosis*. It is the ballet whose lineage may be found in antiquity but whose ancestral home is Versailles.

The composer indicated his desire that the first scene represent the birth of Apollo; that Apollo be born on the stage, springing full-grown from the womb of his mother. It was thought, however, not advisable to stage it in just this way in Washington. Instead, two goddesses (in tulle) appear before the curtain and by their gestures symbolize the importance of the glorious moment. The curtain then rises on a scene suggestive of Piranesi, a ruined temple to the right, a pile of massive rocks mounting towards the left. Apollo in dance celebrates his coming into life. The second scene (Apollo and the Muses) starts with a cadenza for solo violin, unaccompanied at first and then supported by other strings, pizzicati. The Muses appear and dance a *Pas d'Action* before Apollo. There follows the dance of Calliope, an *Allegretto* in six-eighths time which, in the score, bears the motto, a quotation from Boileau:

"Que toujours dans vos vers le sens coupant les mots

"Suspende l'hémistiche et marque le repos."

Polymnia dances an *Allegro*; Terpsichore, the charming Ruth Page, whose enchanting feet were well worth coming to Washington to see, performs an intricate and difficult *Allegro Moderato*. Apollo, Adolph Bolm, dances for the Muses. Apollo and the Muses join in an animated *Coda* which is followed by the *Apotheosis*, Apollo rising higher and higher on the group of rocks to the left while the orchestra brings the ballet softly to an end on a singularly touching B minor chord.



This, externally, is the shape of *Apollo Musagètes*. The music? One feels the inevitable futility of trying to judge a new work—especially one by Stravinsky—after hearing it only once. This work appears amazingly simple; one suspects that it is not quite so simple as it appears; or, rather, that it contains many more subtleties than are at first apparent. Stravinsky, perhaps more than any other composer, has a way of creating a new atmosphere, a new "ambiance," for each of his successive works. One must first penetrate this atmosphere, one must feel

what he is trying to say before presuming to judge whether or not he has succeeded in saying it. How futile to try to appraise *L'Histoire du Soldat* by the standards of *Le Sacre*! Stravinsky seems to be constant in but one thing: his desire to appear before us in the role of the ever-changing Proteus. One should not expect to follow on his heels too immediately. Those who are so persistently telling us how inferior Stravinsky's music of today is to *Le Sacre* seem to forget the almost unanimous condemnation which met *Le Sacre* when it was new. One has one's impressions, no doubt. But an impression is a delightfully fluid thing—of which an opinion is the crystallization. To hasten this process of crystallization is to rob our instinct of its native correctness, to derail the vehicle which, when least hurried, is most likely to take us in the proper direction. This, one feels, is the reason for the inevitable falseness of so much contemporaneous criticism, which demands of a critic an opinion when he is ready only to register his impressions.

The most striking feature of *Apollo Musagètes* is its apparent simplicity. The music is constantly "melodic;" that is, the counterpoint and harmony are completely subservient to a leading melodic line and this line, as in the classic French ballet and the typical nineteenth century Italian opera, occurs most frequently in the upper voice. There are indeed cello melodies accompanied by figures in the higher strings but there are no typical bass melodies and there are never two or more strands of equal importance such as one finds going on at the same time in a more contrapuntal music. The harmonies are, to the greatest extent, consonant, an incalculable distance from the harmonic schemes of *Le Sacre*, a considerable simplification even of that of the piano concerto. Rhythmically we are far from the fascinating distortions of *L'Histoire du Soldat*. The changing units of measurement, the dislocated accents of *Le Sacre* are not with us here. But there is, beneath this apparent lack of the expected rhythmic irregularity, a rhythmic freedom which is magnificent; the phrases are frequently of uneven lengths and they balance each other with a symmetry which is subtle and distinguished by a Tanagra-like grace. The phrases are marked by that admirable preciseness so characteristic of Stravinsky's recent music.

Comparing it to other works of Stravinsky one feels it, naturally enough, closest to *Oedipus Rex*. Aaron Copland who greatly admired *Apollo* felt it to stand in relationship to *Oedipus* somewhat as *L'Histoire du Soldat* does to *Le Sacre*: as I understand it, a lighter, a more informal, a more intimate manifestation of the same phase of the composer's development. It is to *Oedipus* as a Tanagra figure is to the Niobe group. The short opening phrases are punctuated by the same uncompromising caesuras which one finds in the beginning of *Oedipus*. There is the same strange mixture of styles; in the *Variation* of *Apollo*, the first number of the second scene, there is a disturbing pseudo-oriental flavor, an orientalism of Europe, 1845. The dance of *Apollo* and the Muses, in three-fourths time, strongly suggests a slow waltz. It is as though Stravinsky found an anachronistic pleasure in bringing together the styles of various epochs and in showing the slightly bewildered onlooker that in his hands all things are possible; like a dextrous chef-de-cuisine who might wish to demonstrate the ability to create a palatable dish by combining the most far-fetched ingredients, to bring into logical relationship things which ordinarily seem to us to be far apart. There are harmonic peculiarities common to *Apollo* and *Oedipus*; anticipations, bringing together the salient elements of the tonic and dominant chords, dissonances formed by non-harmonic notes belonging definitely to the diatonic scale in which one finds himself, unlike the dissonances in *Le Sacre*, for example, with no trace of polytonality. And there are the same imperious endings, admirable in their conciseness, and infinitely telling.

The orchestration was not what one would ordinarily call effective. This may have been due in part to the fact that the players sat underneath the stage and the sound, as it emerged, lacked acoustical freedom. But a certain dullness is no doubt what Stravinsky desired, for it is inherent in the way in which he has handled his orchestra. The six celli, which number one might ordinarily consider too many for the total of twenty-five strings, are divided throughout into two parts, quite as one ordinarily divides the violins. This does not mean that the celli do not at times play in unison, but so at times do the two violin sections of the more orthodox orchestra. This dividing of the celli

adds a certain darkness, a certain gray heaviness to the orchestral sonority. The violins are rarely led to their highest register so that the general effect is one of the most classic sobriety. Which does not prevent some of the numbers from shining with a cold and arid brilliance; a brilliance that somehow suggests the white footlights and the bare vastness of an operatic stage.

The music is essentially ballet-music of the classic type. Its rhythms, its string-fingers, its mordants, its pizzicati, inevitably suggest *Les Danseuses Etoiles*—from Taglioni to Zambelli. It is in effect Apollonian in quality; it lacks humor, it has no sarcasm, no grotesqueness. But at its best it has great dignity and charm and in its most arid moments it is not devoid of a musical interest which is pure and serious.