

## WHY MODERN MUSIC LACKS MELODY

BY WANDA LANDOWSKA

I HAVE noticed lately, that people are again exciting themselves about melody, beautiful me-e-lod-e-e! Once more we are going to hear this plump and charming person talked about. But then one always returns to one's first love. Not only journalists, critics, and musicians of the ancient regime; even Master d'Indy bestows upon her a supreme consecration: "Alone melody never ages," and his brief, conventional phrase is cited again and again.

Somebody—I do not remember who—has unearthed a saying of Haydn's which is the delight of the champions of melody: "Melody is the main thing, harmony being useful only to charm the ear." The good old uncle, his pockets stuffed with delightful sweetmeats, probably did not foresee with what confidence the world would one day lean upon his philosophical dogmas.

So harmony is useful only to charm the ear and melody is the main thing! Then how shall one class such works as the *Chromatic Fantasy*, most of the *Toccatas* and certain preludes in the *Well-Tempered Clavier* of Bach which are so denuded of melody that the first one, for instance, excited Gounod's pity? I could further cite hundreds of admirable works (and not alone Bach's), devoid of what one calls "melody" or else in which this element plays only a secondary part. The few compositions mentioned are worth most of the melodic beauties of Haydn. And let nobody charge me with irreverence toward the composer of *The Creation*. I have devoted a fair portion of my life to the study of his works and shall continue to my heart's content.



Why does our modern music lack melody? The answer is simple—because it is modern. Modern music has never been

melodic. In the seventeenth century the French accused Italian music of wanting melody, of resembling a bedizened coquette, full of vivacity, striving to shine everywhere to such a degree that all the emotions seem alike. A century later the Italians and their supporters, the Encyclopedists, are reproaching the French for making "learned music," destitute of melody.

Next, it was Gluck's turn to replace beautiful airs by clamors of despair and convulsive groans without the commingled charms of melody. And what is one to say of Bach, whose own sons ran to Padre Martini to learn from him the secret of his beautiful melody? Beethoven, even Chopin, had to clear themselves of such charges. And then Wagner, that monster who killed melody for all time!

We are forced to believe that the good lady has a tough constitution. The oftener her death is proclaimed, the more she has of health and rotundity, and everyone accused of being her murderer has become in his turn her benefactor and her savior.

Seventeenth century Italy had delivered melody from the polyphonic bonds which gripped it too tightly.

Lully saved us from the dragging and lugubrious musical style of the ancients.

Rameau freed us from "the Lullyan plain chant which people had psalmodized for a century."

The Italians of the eighteenth century delivered us from the dryness of Rameau by the delicacy and tenderness of their song. The romanticists freed us from the lightness of the Italians and the French from the contrapuntal cuirass which armored the music of Bach.



What is melody? Our friend, Jean Huré, gave an excellent definition in one of his articles. I am sorry that I do not have it at hand and that I am able to give only an awkward paraphrase: "Melody is a succession of notes forming a precise design, which detaches itself from the background of harmony."

Very well. But the thing that detaches itself for Jean Huré will not detach itself for a mediocre musician and will remain undiscernible for the layman. Take, for instance, Caucasian, Persian, Georgian or Armenian music, all of which has profoundly interested me for years. I find in it treasures of melodic beauty.

Now read the accounts of travellers and observe that where there is any question of exotic music you will run across the same phrases: "strange sonorities, monotony, lack of melody." Yet all such music is necessarily melodious since the natives of these places sing it with no less tenderness and fervor than we do ours. Only the melodic curves and the ornaments of their songs are not familiar to European ears. And this has been the case with all new music; with ears not yet accustomed to modern combinations and the vocal organs not habituated to reproducing them, people raise scandalized outcries about the disappearance of melody and the massacre of the human voice. There are certain wines which sweeten with time. We must believe that the years make music "sing," that they "melodize" it, if one may so express it, and that some music becomes so melodious in the process that it grows sickening. Melodious music is the music of yesterday. The music of today is not so yet, but it will be later; that is why we call it the music of tomorrow; that of the day before yesterday is either too much so or else, (and this oftenest), no longer so at all.

"Melody," they say, "is that in music which speaks most directly to the heart and the mind." That is very true. For the most customary melodic curves have been accompanied during entire epochs by words and situations which impressed upon each of them a definite significance, thus forming what we call the musical language—a language highly conventionalized, moreover, bound to an era and to a cultural status.

All of which reminds me of what Nietzsche said of a painter: "Look at this artist; he paints only what he thoroughly likes, and do you know what he likes so thoroughly? Only what he knows how to paint, what he has learned to paint." Melody is what touches us most. And do you know what touches us most? Whatever our ears can most easily take hold of and what our throats or fingers have learned to reproduce.

The melomaniac does not wish to content himself with a general impression of an opera or a symphonic work. That is too vague, too fugitive for him. He needs more palpable souvenirs, he needs melody—that is to say, some bits of song which he will hear murmuring in his ears all night and which he can hum next day and the following days in his office, at table and in his bed-room to the despair of his wife and others about him.

In this he is very much like those women who so love the restaurants where, as a sort of compensation for bad wine, they receive a pretty paper fan bearing the mark of the establishment.

For the musician melody is a broader conception, but so indeterminate that after a long discussion he never fails to add: "It goes without saying that all I have maintained concerns only *beautiful* melody."

What then is beautiful melody? That which is beautiful for one is not so for another. Berlioz was insensible to the melodic beauties of Bach. Chopin, lover of the songs of Poland, remained deaf to the folk-music of Spain. Submit an air of Massenet's to Saint-Saëns, d'Indy, Debussy; it is doubtful whether their judgments would agree.

Melody, beautiful melody, is a vague conception meaning very little and it is perhaps for this reason that it gets itself freely talked about and causes so much ink-spilling that I can not resist adding a few drops more.



It has not in the least been my intention to pose as a pioneer for ultra-modern music, which already includes masterpieces that champion it far better than I can. And on the other hand I do not in the least believe that something new must be created at any price. I know epigones of genius and I know ridiculous revolutionaries. It is much easier to smash all molds than to have a grain of talent. Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn changed relatively little. Bach was rather a reactionary. Wagner owes his greatness to the immensity of his genius and not to his innovations. It would

be pitiless, even cruel, to force upon shop-keepers, professors or professional musicians an art that was too new or too old. They have had so much trouble to make that of yesterday their own. Let them enjoy it a little!

The traditionalists cry out over the massacre of melody, the vinegar of new harmonies, and avert their faces in terror like some old man who sees the young folks cracking nuts with their teeth.

"When you were young didn't you do the same thing?"

"Yes," he replies (not without pride), "but I am sorry I did."

We too shall do likewise, because we shall want a real old age, accompanied by all the feelings that go with it—wisdom, and, *faute de mieux*, belated regrets; we want a real old age after a real youth.

Don't talk to us of hygiene—of healthy art, healthy melody! The most easily digested foods are not always the best flavored, and what is smoothest loses its taste once it grows familiar.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the *Bergères légères* ended by weighing as heavily as does the Wagnerian mythology today. And yet with what pleasure we revert in our day to the shepherdings of the past! Suffocated in the heavy atmosphere of over-worked romanticism some of us strive to refresh our souls in our magnificent past, others in novel harmonies.

Doesn't modern music seem melodious to you? Well, it will become so. Just a little patience, it is merely a question of time.

"Yes," people tell me "but this melody will never be as frank, as broad. . . ."

So much the better! We have had an entire century of broad and stout, thick and violent, burning and sticky melodies. If modern melody is short of breath, a little asthmatic, and does not address itself to powerful lungs, again so much the better.

"With a strong voice in one's throat," says Nietzsche, "one is almost incapable of saying delicate things."

To be sure, there is nothing like the sight of a great cabbage in flower. But let us also plant a few more fragile blossoms. Our garden is big enough.