

RAVEL AND THE NEW FRENCH SCHOOL

BY ROLAND MANUEL

MUSIC, like all the other arts, receives strangers reluctantly within its borders. But if politics invade this domain, then politics must be called to its defense. It sometimes happens that the outcry raised over a symphony makes more noise than the symphony itself,—especially if the symphony is of a frail constitution. At a little distance nothing is to be heard but the clamor, and willy-nilly one must stop up one's ears, which is not the most favorable attitude for enjoying music.

From a distance the modern French school has, perhaps, an appearance of disorder and discomfort. And if music lovers of other countries get their accounts of our tendencies from the writings and lectures of Darius Milhaud, on the one hand, and from the articles of M. Vuillermoz, on the other, they cannot but be amazed at the conflict of such radically differing opinions.

Perhaps the truth is to be found less on the fields where Vuillermoz and Milhaud for three years have battled so strenuously with equal energy but with such different weapons, than in regions more serene where it will be our pleasure to seek it.

The war is at the bottom of this dispute. Between two generations it opened up a deep chasm, which still yawns, which nothing can fill, and whose depths one hesitates to plumb.

In 1914, the French school, of which Debussy and Ravel were the chief exponents, was just beginning to penetrate beyond the little musical coteries and to make itself felt with the public at large. The following years seemed to hold forth the promise of triumph for these two masters. Instead, they were given over to activities and dominated by ideas very different from music.

During this period a new generation arose, doubly desirous of living and doing. First of all, even before creating anything themselves, they proclaimed the downfall of their elders, whose aesthetic theories they asserted had failed, and tried to thwart the fortune that might at last have smiled on these masters. In their attitude there was no preconceived understanding, no plot; in general it was a spontaneous movement, unavoidable, necessary. One may indeed seek days gone by but they are recalled with difficulty. Youth is pitiless. It must be. Imprudent, too. Our youth has been all this in the most naïve way.

Naturally they attacked the dead less than the living, famous older men less than those in the prime of life and power. Debussy had just died. For him they proclaimed a sort of modest enthusiasm, and for the great Gabriel Fauré an affectionate respect. Their chosen rival had, of course, to be a musician who was coming into fame, one still young and capable of new achievements. Maurice Ravel was just the man.

The passage from one generation to the next is always marked by a series of rites whose order never changes: first, the insult and provocation; then, if possible, the assassination and subsequent theft. After the theft the murderers decide that the possessions of the victim have some worth. With these they adorn themselves and the same story begins again.



To understand what is really peculiar in this case, it must first be noted that the rising generation has suffered from the war in its own way; technical apprenticeship was necessarily hasty and often entirely neglected. These young people's preparation for life had all the brutality of a preparation for war. Impatient, bellicose, and, with few exceptions, poorly armed, they elected as their chief a musician like themselves, a singular artist, a sort of customs-collector Rousseau of music, who counted far less be-

cause of his own works than because of those he inspired. Erik Satie, always a precursor, has been throughout thirty-five years the instigator of all audacity, the manager of all imprudence. This will be his best and, all in all, his only title to fame. He has found in the practice of ingratitude the secret of eternal youth. Debussy owes him a great deal, and Ravel, and the Stravinsky of *Mavra*, as well as Poulenc and Auric, to say nothing of the pupils of that new group known as the school of Arcueil. A curious destiny this man's, who will leave behind him probably not one great work but certainly a great name.



Satie was the high-priest of the little musical chapels which arose in Paris about the end of the war. He was the patron first of the society of the *Nouveaux Jeunes*, out of which in 1919 came the famous Group of Six.

The Group of Six was actually formed without the knowledge of its members, by a Paris critic, M. Collet. After having heard, first at the Vieux-Colombier concerts and later at Darius Milhaud's, various pieces by Auric, Milhaud, Durey, Poulenc, Honegger and Tailleferre, he compared these six French artists to the five Russians. This naïveté found public favor. United by friendship, the Six were by no means aesthetically a unit. In fact one seldom sees six such different heads under one bonnet. These young people had nothing in common. They even differed in their feeling toward their foster father Satie, and their good friend Jean Cocteau. A work on aesthetics by the latter, a very remarkable thing in itself, which appeared at the same time as the articles of M. Collet, was in full accord only with the tendencies of Georges Auric, and to a certain extent with those of Poulenc. Neither Milhaud, nor Durey, nor Germaine Tailleferre could have subscribed unrestrictedly to the aphorisms set forth in *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* of Cocteau. As to Honegger, his tendency expressed itself in exactly the opposite direction.

One desire, and that quite a natural one,—to make themselves known during adverse times,—held the Six together. “We have seen,” wrote Milhaud, “in the formation of this group a means to coordinate our activities.” Nevertheless, in spite of what they already stood for individually, the Six were to see themselves shut in a closer circle than they had expected. Reasons of state often compelled them to hide their differences. More than once, either with silence or with complaisance, they permitted their enemies or their rivals to credit the group as a whole with the ideas of one of them. *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, which would have been favorably received in so far as it was a work of the poet Jean Cocteau, passed for the catechism of the Six, and in this guise excited the wrath of the eminent critic Vuillermoz, who attributed to these young victims a deep contempt for Debussy and Ravel.



It is noteworthy that there is no question of Ravel in *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, where on the other hand Debussy's aesthetics are severely censured. The origin of the anti-Ravel movement lies in another place, a place where we again find Erik Satie. Former friend, former admirer, former debtor of Ravel, he never succeeded in dragging him into his Machiavellian political combinations, and always in this connection ran foul of Ravel's cold spirit of independence. Published in the little reviews of the *avant-garde*, the attacks of Satie on Ravel were always based on insults.

Opposed to this group of young musicians who, ardent and restless as it is natural to be at their age, are compromised despite themselves by the witticisms of Cocteau and the violences of Erik Satie, let us picture Maurice Ravel,—ironical, making reserve a first law unto himself, and masking charming simplicity under the set smile of a precise decorum. Ravel is a man whom his most intimate friends have never seen in his shirt sleeves. He is too well bred to try to interest the public in his affairs. Great enthusiasms are not at all in his line. He is not readily encouraging;

still less is he a toady. He lives in the country, apart from the Parisian tumult; he answers no letters, writes no articles, is the despair of all photographers and interviewers, neglects his own interests, and cares so little about his reputation that he seems to be the least dangerous man in the world to attack. Most fortunately his music is of a stature to defend itself, and to do so victoriously. Georges Auric, who on several occasions had the courage to attack it straightforwardly, with frankness and courtesy, now has the courage to praise it.

Here as elsewhere, one can measure the importance of the work by the liveliness of the reaction which it arouses, and its vitality by the character of its defense. So far, Ravel has put up a serene front to the accusations which some of the young men hurl against him, crusading for an aesthetic principle of which he himself is at the present time the only valid exponent. Stark simplicity, "art stripped to the bone," which the prophets of the new dispensation proclaim with a paradoxical wealth of imagery and lack of simplicity, does not flourish very often in the undergrowth of pretended polytonality, and it is in Ravel's music that the best examples of these qualities are still to be found. The reestablishment of the cult of Gounod, which is the order of the day, corresponds about exactly with the breaking in of an open door,—a door opened by Chabrier and Fauré forty years ago and kept open by Debussy and Ravel.



In so far as we are seeking a purer line, a clearer design, a more incisive musical speech; in so far as we feel the need not of a return to classicism but of a new classicism; in so far as, weary of the facile sleight of hand of false magicians, we prefer the rigorous turns of good acrobats and the integrity of sure craftsmanship to the sincerity of a blind heart, we involve ourselves in a perilous maze which is illuminated today only by the work of Stravinsky

and Ravel, each in his own fashion. That of Ravel marks the continuity of an aesthetic principle which cannot be ignored if one has any feeling for the French tradition. Thus Darius Milhaud gives us no cause for complaint when he compares the author of *La Valse* with Saint-Saëns. Irony aside, this comparison does not lack justness and should suffice to clear Ravel forever of that imputation of impressionism which his detractors have been incessantly repeating for twenty years.

Does this amount to saying that all the possibilities of French music are to be found in embryo in the music of Ravel? By no means. Ravel is not the whole of music. He is simply, today, next to his master Fauré, the most remarkable representative of that sensuous school which has such deep roots in our national genius.

It is not only the right but even the duty of our young musicians to travel in their own directions, away from the paths laid out by Debussy and Ravel. One can only praise the Six for having done this for five years with varying luck but so conscientiously that they are, aesthetically speaking, out of sight. They will thus have known the advantages of union without having suffered unduly from intimacy. *Les Etudes*, *Le Pacific* of Honegger and *Les Fâcheux* of Auric are not less different from one another than each one of them is from *Daphnis et Chloé*, and there is nothing yet to show us that the work of Ravel belongs to the last century. One surmises merely that the composer of *Les Poèmes de Mallarmé*, a prisoner of Ravelian perfectionism, is approaching that climacteric period when great creators are forced to remold themselves under penalty of fruitless repetition. Tragic moment, when one must give up one's most precious acquisitions, abandon them to the conqueror at the gates, and set out with empty hands toward new shores.

It is not by breaking down the doors that Ravel will come out of the prison which he himself has so well contrived. His sonata for violin and violoncello shows very plainly the mousehole that he is digging for his escape. Where is he going? He is not telling us himself, not being a man to sell the bear's skin without having first killed it.

The Six have done differently, following in this Jean Cocteau's advice: to force themselves to kill the bear, they have begun by selling his hide; and it is just this that Emile Vuillermoz holds against them, doubting whether they can succeed in resembling "the prophetic image of themselves that over-lucid portraitists have painted of them."

That several of the Six have already arrived there does honor not alone to the portraitists.

