

## PARIS OPERA JUST BEFORE THE OCCUPATION

IN Paris, during recent seasons, the association of the national lyric theatres, the Opéra, Opéra-Comique, and the ancient theatre at Orange, under the sole direction of M. Jacques Rouché, made possible the realization of a dream this eminent director had pursued for many years. At last we witnessed a renaissance. The Opéra-Comique, which had suffered so long, was oriented toward a revival of old French music of the eighteenth century and the works of Chabrier, like *Le Roi malgré lui* and *Une Education manquée*. Offenbach too was honored. There was a revival of pieces by Jacques Ibert, and a whole evening was devoted to me, with *Le Pauvre matelot*, the staging of *Esther de Carpentras* and a ballet based on my *Suite Provençale*. If the war had not intervened, M. Rouché planned to give some abridged spectacles, with Marcel Achard, Salacrou, Jean Anouilh, Stève Passeur and Troyat writing librettos for musicians like Auric, Sauguet, Honegger, Ibert, Poulenc and Messiaen. The assistance of such a young and energetic conductor as Désormière, new stage directors like Mercier and Fabert, and young painters like André Marchand, who made splendid sets for the authentic version of Gounod's *Mireille*, were elements in a new upsurge in this theatre.

For some time now, the spectacles at the Opéra have had a remarkable quality. The performance of Henri Sauguet's delightful *Chartreuse de Parme* with costumes and settings stamped with the sure taste of Jacques Dupont was one of the most beautiful moments of this renaissance. The corps de ballet had developed a marvelous spirit. How many ballets by Nabokoff, Ferroud, Honegger, Manuel, Françaix, Rosenthal, Rieti were produced within a few short years! My own *Salade* was revived with a new décor by André Derain.

Since 1938, the government had been commissioning scores each year. Marcel Delannoy received an order for a three-act opera, Henri Barraud for a work in one act, Germaine Tailleferre for a cantata, Elsa Barraine for a symphony, Auric for an opera. And so it was at the request of the Minister of National Education that I wrote *Medée*.

For some years I had wanted to portray a jealous woman on the grand scale of Phèdre or Hermione. My wife, Madeleine Milhaud, suggested the idea of Medea. She studied the Medeas of Seneca, Euripides and Corneille and then prepared a libretto which, thanks to her knowledge of the theatre and of the proportions I like for dramatic works, suited my requirements

perfectly. The request of the state was an opportunity to carry out this project. M. Rouché then called upon Charles Dullin, director of the Théâtre de l'Atelier for the stage direction and André Masson for the décor.

The war broke out but the Opéra did not give up the project, and all during the "calm" period of this frightfulness, the Opéra continued its work. Dullin made a striking *mise-en-scène*. He divided the ancient chorus into two parts: a singing group immobile as a wall surface and a dancing chorus choreographically expressive of the emotions of the drama. To express all phases of the magic sorcery of Medea, which was clearly indicated in the malign throne conceived by the artist Masson, she was attended by three mysterious, crawling figures, suggesting her crimes; these disappeared in the purely dramatic parts of the work.

Rehearsals were begun but illness prevented my following them. I arrived in Paris just in time for the *répétition générale* to find that everything had been prepared with perfect care. Marisa Ferrer made a sensational characterization of Medea, and Jeannine Michaud personified innocence itself in the difficult vocalizing of the role of Creusa. In short, from every point of view, this was a performance of rare perfection. Despite the dull sound of the anti-aircraft guns that one heard throughout the spectacle, I did not then remotely imagine that this was to be the last work staged by the Opéra before military disaster overtook my unhappy country.

The premiere was given on May 8th. Had it not been for the many military uniforms, it might have seemed a pre-war performance, so great were the crowds, so brilliant, so elegant the audience. On May 10th, Belgium and Holland were invaded. Then the Battle of France began. *Medée* was performed again on the fifteenth and then on the twenty-fifth. This last performance before an almost empty house was broadcast by the state radio and I heard it at my home in the country in Aix-en-Provence.

So it was that I had the good fortune to see my latest theatre work produced – and with what perfection! – during the high-tide of war. How moving it is for me to think that the last performance of the Opéra of Paris was granted to me – like a magnificent gift from my country before the curtain rose on the drama which destroyed it.

*Darius Milhaud*

## DRUMS ALONG THE PACIFIC

**D**URING the last two years an extraordinary interest in percussion music has developed on the Pacific coast. In Seattle, San Francisco,