

## MYSTICS IN MUSIC TODAY

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A STRIKING development in contemporary music is the emergence in various quarters of an art, religious, or to be more precise, mystic in character, entirely free of any definite sectarian idea. If André Caplet, for example, Honegger and even Louis Gruenberg do not absolutely adhere to the particular creed of any one of the established faiths, they at least partake of the general spirit, while Felix Petyrek and Nicolas Oboukhov (to name only two artists who have produced a considerable amount of work) follow the trend of a certain free mysticism or even occultism that is springing up everywhere today.

These two composers are, as a matter of fact, complete opposites. The Russian, Oboukhov, was brought to public attention at the Paris Opera last June by Serge Koussevitzky's performance of a fragment of his principal work, *Le Livre de Vie*.

Oboukhov is essentially of the Scriabin tradition. We know that Scriabin at the time of his death was working on a vast mystery which was to be played over a period of several days, a veritable religious ceremony from which he expected miraculous effects. *Le Livre de Vie* is based on exactly the same idea. The text, by Oboukhov himself, is written in a frankly apocalyptic style with a good many expressions that have a closer relation to old Slavonic than to modern Russian. The author hopes that his work will help establish a new milestone in human and divine evolution, a sort of fusion of humanity with a godlike entity. This he calls, in his very special manner, "The Enthronement of the All-Powerful Sovereign Shepherd."

It is from Scriabin also that Oboukhov derives his harmonic style and atonality. The latter is developed to an extreme degree. Most of Oboukhov's chords are produced by the simultaneous use of the twelve notes of the tempered scale, and he

forgoes all doubling. He used a duodecimal system of composition some time before Schoenberg but quite differently, that is, harmonically and vertically.

The voice in *Le Livre de Vie*, as in Schoenberg, performs continual glissandos. It may be said that in a way Oboukhow tries to make us hear at each given moment a sonorous totality. But despite moments of great violence and movement this method has the drawback of lending to the work a quality of immobility, of stagnation. We seem to be given the whole thing from the very first moment. Nor are the duodecimal chords always as dissonant and ear-splitting as one might imagine. They convey an extreme tenderness, at times a crystalline transparency.

*Le Livre de Vie*, like many Russian works, creates the effect of extraordinarily intense grief. It is as if Oboukhow were striving to break through the boundaries of the human ego to dissolve it in the Universe.

It is of course possible to progress further along this path than Oboukhow has done. For he looks upon the duodecimal tone system of the tempered scale as an absolute. Some of his followers have not been content to stop there. Wichnegradsky for example, also a composer of marked mystic tendencies, employs quarter tones and dreams of achieving the continuous progression which sound naturally forms from the lowest to the highest pitch, and of finding a chord that might comprise this entire progression uninterruptedly, without successive steps. I believe this has the elements of a most fascinating acoustic experiment. Wichnegradsky has called this imaginary chord the "universal chord" because it would include all the possible elements of sound, and I have suggested naming it the Panphonic chord.

Whether one does or does not indorse all of Oboukhow's theories it must be admitted that though still very young, he has achieved a monumental work which a man as free of mysticism as Maurice Ravel regards, from a purely musical standpoint, as one of the most important productions of the present day.

The stamp of recognition was accorded Felix Petyrek, an Austrian, thirty-four years of age, at the International Festival for Contemporary Music in Zurich last June. His *Litanei* was the real "hit" of the occasion. Its clarity, luminous quality and

rhythmic, often tonal, freshness make Petyrek's music as completely different from Oboukhow's as possible.

During the war Petyrek spent several years studying the popular music of the western and southern Slavs and there is something racial in his religiousness, especially in the *Litanei*. But his work is animated by a conviction, a profound faith which lends it incomparable power. At times the musical material he employs is comparatively thin; he often lengthily repeats short melodic phrases which in themselves have no particular significance. Some of his melodies on the other hand are spacious and beautiful, and even his relatively brief themes have an extraordinary relief, a rare moral and spiritual quality that often reminds me of those short "mantrains" which certain mystics repeat to themselves in order to effect desired psychic results. By its various choruses of penitents, priests, common people, spirits, anguished and unborn souls, the *Litanei* recalls those Renaissance paintings in which all the mundane and supermundane spheres are ranked in solemn hierarchy.

Besides his *Litanei*, Petyrek has written three other "spiritual compositions" as he calls them. First, fragments from the *Song of Songs* in which a voice chants a sort of recitative while the organ accompaniment describes a vast rondo; then *Abendsmahl*, a work for women's chorus and a small number of instruments. The theme is the plaint of a person whose imperfections seem to cut him off from the vast life of the Universe; a spirit who radiates the influence of the twelve signs of the Zodiac appears and conducts him toward the Savior.

The third "spiritual composition" is a suite for women's chorus based on the collection of popular German verses, the *Knabenswunderhorn*. It has more banal moments than the others but certain passages are made up of chords whose intervals are so superposed as to produce an inner resonance of the strangest sonority. Just now Petyrek is working on an opera, *The Garden of Paradise*, in a very melodic style.

Petyrek is connected, like myself, with a mystical movement known as Anthroposophy. But this culture has produced a different effect on me than on the Austrian. The spiritual development that accompanies all such movements has led me to

eliminate from my music every possible harmonic element, to compose in a purely melodic style.

In a hymn taken from the *Upanishads* I have used only the voice and flute, which intertwine in a very simple pattern. Later I succeeded in writing two *Songs* (one on words from *Saint Theresa* and the other from *Novalis*) without accompaniment. Pure melody to me represents the effort of the ego striving to discover in itself, rather than from impressions of the outside world, the source of its being. Speaking from my own viewpoint, pure melody corresponds to the spirit, harmony to the realm of feeling. They are two distinct things.

Generally speaking, I believe that all musical mysticism is based more or less consciously on a musical "realism" in the philosophic sense of the word, that is, on the conviction that there exists in the Universe, hovering all about us, a supra-sensible music of which the composer, usually without his realizing it, does nothing but record some echoes. The existence of an essential and superhuman sound has to some degree been divined by the mystics of all the ages. And for me, it is one of Ferruccio Busoni's greatest titles to fame that he accepted this idea and voiced it publicly. Busoni's ideas on the division of the octave into intervals other than the usual half tones—his conceptions of third and quarter tones—are already beginning to be applied very interestingly the world over. I am convinced that in a very short time the second fundamental idea of this great artist and prophet, that of the existence of a hyper-physical world of sound (see his *Introduction to a New Aesthetic*,) will exercise great influence.

The composer who would follow these ideas will have to adopt, it seems to me, a new attitude of mind. His chief concern will be to create a profound silence in himself to permit great cosmic influences to issue through him. In that state he might be compared symbolically to the statues of Memnon in ancient Egypt, of which historians reported their very inner structure to be so attuned that when the rays of the rising sun struck them, they began of themselves to give forth sound.