

EXOTIC AND CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

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THE relationship between music of any given time and popular music, whether traditional or exotic, obviously varies in proportion to what is known of the latter. Nineteenth century Spanish art delved into traditional sources, but only within its own territory. Russian musicians of the same period were then already drawing on sources foreign to their race, on Asiatic elements. Except for Moussorgsky, they inserted, if I may use the expression, exotic locutions into a Germanic syntax without visibly changing it. The influence of the Javanese gamelang (heard at the 1900 Paris exposition) on the style of Debussy, marks the beginning of more subtle interchanges. I do not believe that Debussy literally borrowed from Javanese art, but without this art, would he have used incomplete scales, as in *Fêtes* for example, in so delightful a fashion?

Since then the relations between exotic and modern music have developed in quite different directions. In America for example, musicians as different as Eichheim, Jacobi, Werner Josten, are inspired by folklores, as various as those of the Far East, America, and Central Africa. South America (Villa Lobos, Brocqua, etc.) is something for special consideration; so is the use in Havana of Afro-Cuban rhythms and percussion.

But I have been specially interested in the probably unconscious, the indirect influence of various exotic musics on certain modern musicians. In the case of Far Eastern and Javanese sonorities it is not definite that the influence they have had on Stravinsky in selecting instrumental groupings for *Noces* was unconscious. But certainly when he was writing the *Sacre du Printemps*, it was not at all possible that he was familiar with the powerful repetitions of Kanaka choruses of New Caledonia, or the rhythmic breaks, the machine-like breathing of certain great

Tahitian choruses. These Kanaka epics, these Tahitian festival choruses (executed sometimes by four hundred singers) were first made known through the remarkable recordings of 1931 heard at the Colonial Exposition in Paris, the work of Mme. Humbert-Lavergne and M. Philippe Stern for the Sorbonne and the Musée Guimet. And when Stravinsky wrote his *Symphonies* for wind instruments, he could have had absolutely no knowledge of the Shinto music reserved exclusively in Japan for certain imperial ceremonies. This is an importation from China; it certainly goes back to before the fourteenth century. It has a wild grandeur, its dissonances are terrible to the ear; Paul Claudel describes it as being composed of "undefined and superimposed surfaces like geologic strata, the breaking of one revealing the others. On top certain squeezed notes, a deep blow, which thunders or clatters, bear witness to surfaces which have disappeared." Some scraps of this imperial music have recently been recorded by Victor. I know nothing closer to the heavy chords of Stravinsky's *Symphonies*.

To continue further with similarities to the music of Japan, it seems to me that the way in which Schönberg has developed the passage from the spoken to the singing voice in many of his works, and also the way in which he exploits the glissando method in the strings, have some strange relationship to certain technics of "No" art. There are Victor records which show how the great "No" actors, pass without a pause from a guttural and resonant speech to a musical sound. Except for the shamisen there is no instrument which produces glissandi so strange or so like Schönberg's.

Phonograph records are obviously the only valid way in which to study exotic music. The system, of course, was inaugurated scientifically in Europe some twenty years ago by the German musicologist Kurt Sachs. The album of "far-off" musics published by von Hornbostel should be in the hands of every musician; it is a monument. In America the work carried on by Miss Helen H. Roberts is extremely important, while in Italy, Gavino Gabriel, investigator of the art of Sardinia, has begun the formation of a *discoteca di stato*. Various expeditions are exploring Africa. I have seen some interesting discoveries

made by these French ethnographers, among whom is the musicologist André Schaffner, who has been from Dakar to Djibouti.

But so far, it is the records to which I have already referred, those made in Paris by Mme. Humbert Lavergne and M. Philippe Stern which seem to be most interesting in a major and too neglected aspect of exotic music, polyphony. A number of regions have a music which is instinctively polyphonic. Of course, Europe has been at times responsible for the introduction of polyphonic music among primitive peoples, sometimes in a terrible form under the influence of missionaries (Oceanica) but sometimes in a more delicate and attractive way. Thus the art of Madagascar was affected in the eighteenth century by the influence of the French clavecinists and the result, that is to say, all present day music for the Valiha, a cylindrical stringed instrument, is absolutely delightful.

But there are privileged regions where there is an entirely independent polyphonic music. André Schaffner notes and points out (in the issue of the review, *Le Minotaure*, Paris, which was devoted to the Dakar-Djibouti expedition) certain polyphonic embryos in the little Kirdi orchestra, composed of whistles and horns.

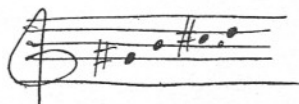
The Humbert-Lavergne Stern recordings have revealed a very little known literature, that for the *senza* of Africa. This is a small instrument with metallic plates regulated in a singular fashion by the thumb. The chord of the plates of the *senza* is often very significant; here is an example:



This very rapid music is glittering and iridescent, it has made me think of the trappings of Debussy's piano music. Some natives play the *senza* with a frenzied virtuosity; there are Iturbis and Horowitzes in Darkest Africa! And music for the *Senza* frequently contains polyphonic elements.

I would not want to leave the subject of Africa without noting the splendor of certain Dahomey choruses, where the voices often alternate with the flute. The tom-tom music of this country

is austere but of a grandiose simplicity. A tom-tom piece, noted by Mme. Humbert-Lavergne, uses only these four notes:-



but the effect of the triton (augmented fourth) is very curious in it. Certain choruses formerly intended to accompany human sacrifices are also very beautiful.

One of the choice countries for music traditionally polyphonic seems to me to be Laos, which is north of Cambodia, in French Indo-China. All French Indo-China has a very cultivated art, but Cambodia in particular is the home of the most noble traditions. At Laos, there is what is perhaps the most alluring instrument I have ever heard, the mouth organ called the *khen*. The timbre is soft, penetrating, warm, at the same time rich and veiled. Above all, the *khen* lends itself to all kinds of polyphonies.

For those who seek new ways today of writing polyphonic music, for those who are not satisfied by chord writing based on resonance, the study of primitive music can furnish valuable examples. Already M. Tommasi has created Laotian songs which owe little to European technic and yet are not a copy of their model. Various other regions could serve as starting points for new polyphonic research; I am thinking, for example of the Kanakas of the island of Lifou, of the Chleu Berbers, etc.

At all events, exotic music considered from this viewpoint, seems to me to be something of the present, as modern as many of our so-called civilized arts. A *Khen* solo intended to aid the search for the body of an infant, is as alive and of the present as any artificial and ephemeral sonata which flourishes in our concert halls. The congress of Mohammedan music held in Cairo in 1932 seems to me as modern as most of our music festivals.

The art of the Ragas in India, that of the *Noulet* in Islamic countries, seeks above all to create a certain harmony with the universe. The music of China has always been regulated by forces related to the Solstice. In some quite different fashion, the musician of the future should be able to guide himself by principles like these, to re-establish contact with the universe.