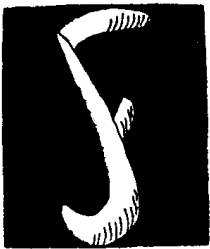


THE LEAN YEARS

BY HENRY PRUNIERES



FIRST of all I must abjure any claims to being an aesthete or primarily a critic. I am a historian who loves music passionately and seeks to understand before judging it. Knowing the music of the past often helps me to realize what is happening in the music of today.

We are passing at present through a great crisis comparable in importance to that period at the end of the sixteenth century which witnessed the ruin of polyphonic art and of the old modes, and the triumph of monody—the opera, cantata, sonata—and modern tonalities. It is quite evident however that the polyphony of the Renaissance, in its early stages especially, expressed a delicacy and richness very different from the Florentine monody. The contrapuntal masters composed on a single theme great church masses suggesting vast Gothic cathedrals, and they chiseled the precious motets with the perfection of goldsmiths plying their art. The Italians expressed all the aspirations of the soul, the most fleeting impressions, through their five-part madrigals; the French in their songs painted large clear frescos of sound evoking colorful scenes of the battle, the hunt, town cries, etc.

A day came when this art, so rich and varied, exhausted itself and perished of its own sterility. There was nothing further to be said, formalism had triumphed over untrammelled inspiration. Then followed a period of anarchy identical to what we find at the

present moment. Means of escape were sought along every possible avenue, a thousand extravagant experiments were begun, all the laws of art were suddenly violated, until slowly a new order was established and a new technique gradually and laboriously developed.

We are at such a point today. After Debussy, really the greatest French musician of modern times, and after his school, which attempts to reduce the conceptions of his genius to formulae, there is no path left to explore in the school of expressionism. Maurice Ravel, who seems to me to play a role in music analogous to that of Renoir in painting, was one of the very first to realize the need of a new equilibrium, a new classicism. Moreover, this new classicism which Ravel, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg have been seeking along such diverse roads, can not be found by searching in the past, but by marching boldly forward. It is most probable that it will be revealed eventually as quite different from anything we can now imagine. Music in all likelihood will undergo a temporary impoverishment in its medium of expression.

It is certain that the idea of tonality is now in the process of transformation. While Schoenberg, Von Webern, Honegger, and Busoni build solid works that are absolutely atonal, Bartok, Roussel, Stravinsky, and Ravel are developing the mingling of tonalities.

Darius Milhaud enjoys making four or five melodies evolve simultaneously, each in a different tonality, and from this rather crude method he manages to get some powerful effects, notably in *Protée* and in the *Choéphores*. The majority of young French musicians—Poulenc, Auric, Roland Manuel or Daniel Lazarus—are experimenting in this medium. It is evident that the new technique remains to be found and that the present group who are seeking it have as their object merely the hastening of its advent.

I believe that the time for national schools is past, at least for several generations to come, and that again, as in the fifteenth or at the end of the eighteenth century, music will become a universal language absorbing individual idioms.

It is, of course, very annoying to have a new language to learn just when we were beginning really to master that which was

spoken yesterday, but it is absolutely necessary, for art never ceases to evolve, and its processes succeed each other with lightning rapidity though its essence remains immutable.

