

MODERN MUSIC

THE DEPARTURE FROM OPERA

BY HENRY PRUNIERES

THE music drama created by Wagner is destined, it appears, to be shorter lived than its predecessor, the Opera. The latter thrived splendidly for more than three centuries, but only fifty years after its birth the music drama shows signs of a decline. Even the genius of Richard Strauss is not strong enough to revive its moribund body. Though it is true that well-known composers in every country still achieve popular success through the formulas of Massenet, Strauss and Puccini, all the younger men cherish a deep disdain for the contemporary music drama, a single desire to discover a substitute.

It is as well to recognize from the start that at the heart of this situation there is still the fundamental problem of the recitative. Lyric drama at first consisted of simple declamation supported by large chords. Little by little music took precedence over the poetry. The airs, songs, duos, trios and ensembles gradually encroached upon the recitative and reduced it to a secondary role though it remained indispensable as a means to explain the action. Benefiting by the development of the symphony, the orchestra became an ever more important factor. Then Wagner appeared, to re-animate the old tradition of uninterrupted song. But he let the voice flow out above the tumultuous waves of the orchestra which by themselves were sufficient to express all human passion. It is to this conception that Richard Strauss remains faithful. Debussy made use of the orchestra to suggest states of the soul, atmospheres; the role of song he reduced to recitative in the manner

of the old Florentine composers and of Lully, realizing in this way a remarkable balance between the music and the words.

At last the day arrived when composers, weary of the uninterrupted melody of declamation, became the champions of absolute music and branded the recitative as anti-musical. But how, without a recitative, shall one explain a dramatic situation? It is only possible when the action is of the simplest character, for which gestures rather than words will suffice. Toward such subjects and devices the greatest number of composers have turned; a few, looking backward at the past, have undertaken to revive the old opera.



Strawinsky in *Mavra* takes the opera of Tchaikowsky as a model, but only for the voice; the orchestra, with its syncopated rhythms, its peculiar dynamics, remains absolutely personal. The resultant impression is of irrelevance, recalling those modern interiors where one sees Louis Philippe chairs upholstered with stuffs woven in a cubist design. The conception of *Renard* is much newer, with its pantomimic action, and its dances on higher stage levels, the singers in the orchestra pit commenting upon the drama. No recitative, nothing but songs of a popular flavor which suffice to express the very simple subject of this fable.

Mavra can be explained by the fact that the young composers are just beginning to discover the marvelous resources of the human voice. Since Wagner, the voice has been frowned upon and allotted the cruelest burdens, the most ungrateful tasks. No effort was made to study its proper exploitation. It was in his quest for tone-qualities that Strawinsky became enamored of the voice as he was formerly of the alto-clarinet. ("Like the skin of a young girl," he said, at the height of his enthusiasm.) Then he quite naturally turned toward the masters of the Opera, toward those who had so lavishly utilized all the possibilities of the voice, Bellini, Glinka, Gounod and Tchaikowsky.

The same tendency can be traced in Karol Szymanowski, the Pole. His *King Roger* is structurally conceived in the style of a nineteenth century "Grand Opera," with its airs, marches and choruses. The music itself is modern in feeling, and the writing has great refinement. However the human voice, re-established, occupies the place of honor. I know this work only from the manuscript score, but I believe that herein lies perhaps the most successful modern attempt to revive the form of the Opera.

In *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, Ravel has obviously drawn on the music hall. For after all, what is this opera ballet if not a revue in which the child plays the role of the announcer. One by one, familiar objects and animals come upon the scene to talk with the child, sing an air, dance and then go off. Ravel's dry and precise declamation alternates with lyric flights which also are reminiscent of the past. In this exquisite score there are airs very well constructed in the melodic sense. There is also the curious effect of a spoken chorus accompanied by an orchestral pianissimo.

Last year a delightful score, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, by Paul le Flem, was introduced to us during Mme. Beritza's season. It is the old *récit* of the middle ages, intelligently adapted. A narrator at one side of the stage sings the romance of two lovers who take up the speech at stated intervals. It is the conception of dramatic madrigals used by Monteverdi in the *Conbattimento di Tancredi e di Clorinda*, an interesting form for experiment.

Everywhere among the moderns in France one feels this profound disaffection with the music drama. It is in the form of ballet that Darius Milhaud, Poulenc, Auric and Germaine Tailleferre have given their best, while Arthur Honegger appears to greatest advantage in oratorio.

Such music dramas as Milhaud has written are not, however, negligible. The *Choëphores* and the *Eumenides* have pages of sombre power and astonishing audacity. But the novelties in these works are of a musical rather than a dramatic order, for example the device of accompanying entire scenes by percussion instruments alone. Roland Manuel has given new life to the opera bouffe in his *Isabelle et Pantalon*, written to a libretto by Max Jacob; here again we have the case of the composer glancing backward at the past.

With Arnold Schoenberg we have a quite opposite orientation. There is nothing more personal, or more original than the form of his works. The most successful is apparently that strange monodrama, *Erwartung*, the action of which, confined to a single character, synthesizes all the emotions of a creature enslaved by love. The subject matter is obviously decadently romantic. A woman goes in the night to join her lover in the moonlit forest, and stumbles over his corpse on the doorstep of her rival. The music flows on without interruption, without apparent construction, without the repetition of any motif. It is a continual suggestion of states of the soul, expressed in spare lines, extremely condensed. It reminds one of certain psychological dramas by Strindberg, but the form has a far greater originality.

Die Glueckliche Hand, produced in Vienna last winter, is played by three characters, two silent, and one a singer—the man, the woman and a “fine gentleman.” A mixed chorus opens and closes the scene. As always with Schoenberg, one receives the impression of very curious laboratory experiments rather than of work truly endowed with life.

Although *Pierrot Lunaire* is not designed for the stage, the extraordinary device of the *sprech-stimme*, invented by Schoenberg, is surely destined to future dramatic usages. Schoenberg himself has never employed this in his own stage works, and has avoided, as best he could, the necessity of explaining the action, by rendering it intelligible through scenic changes and pantomime.



Abhorrence of unadorned declamation and of thematic development is carried to the extreme by Francesco Malipiero. His most characteristic work, the *Orfeide*, is a trilogy: *La Morte delle Maschere*, *Sette Canzoni*, and *Orfeo*. He began by writing *Sette Canzoni* in 1917, to ancient poetic texts—a troubadour song, the song of the drunkard, the serenade, etc. For each one of these he has designed an appropriate stage setting; in the serenade for example, at the rise of the curtain a young girl is discovered praying

at a death-bed, while from the wings comes the sound of women's prayers. Suddenly through an open window a love-song is heard. The serenader, unable to understand the continued silence of his beloved, knocks at the door; she opens it and, taken aback, he kneels down beside her. The obscene song of Politiano, *Una Vecchia mi Vagheggia*, is sung by a sexton in a belfry tower during a fire. As one can see, all these subjects are very ingenious and at the same time quite romantic. They are "slices of life," cinematographic views. No need of recitative to explain. *La Morte delle Maschere*, which serves as prologue to the *Sette Canzoni* was written later. An impresario locks the classic figures of Italian comedy in a closet, after presenting each in turn to the public. He then calls to the stage the characters who figure in the *Sette Canzoni*—convention superseded by life.

But *Orfeo*, which serves as an epilogue, shows us, if we understand its rather obscure meaning, the musician disillusioned with his own efforts. The stage setting is striking to a degree. The scene is a long splendid room at one end of which a theatre is erected. Courtesans move about in the crowd, until the entrance of the king and queen. The curtain rises on a second smaller theatre for marionettes. At its one side sit children, at the other old men in perukes. A marionette impersonating Nero then appears, ordering bloodshed and fire; the children applaud, the old men protest. Darkness falls, and one sees Orfeo in the costume of Pierrot. He sings, parodying the lyric outbursts dear to the contemporary operatic realists. The king and his followers are soon snoring in their sleep; the queen throws herself into the arms of Orfeo and disappears with him—adulterated lyricism triumphing over the hearts of women.

It is not necessary to recount the musical merits of this trilogy here. From the dramatic standpoint it is obviously one of the most original and fruitful experiments yet made.

With the *Commedie Goldoniane* we return to a more usual theatrical convention. Malipiero has made several one-act librettos from certain comedies of Goldoni—*La Bottega di Caffè*, *Sor Todero Brontolon*, *Le Baruffe Chiozzotte*. He gives his characters only words that are indispensable to the action, and more often gestures replace even these. Nevertheless, when the action

permits, the characters sing real songs. Malipiero's new opera in three parts, still unpublished, *Philomela e L'Infatturato*, makes much greater use of pure lyricism; it is without doubt the most evolved and also the most essentially Italian score he has written.



The majority of Malipiero's works could very well be performed in a perfected marionette theatre, like that of the celebrated Teatro dei Piccoli of Rome. This theatre has accomplished a surprising *tour de force*, especially in the province of the stage settings, but it could have gone further if a very timorous public had not acted as drawback. It has succeeded best in producing old works, and has hardly attempted to mount the more advanced productions. This is indeed a great pity, because such a theatre, supported by a large orchestra and able singers, should be able to make up an extraordinary repertoire of works by Strawinsky, Schoenberg, Bartók, Manuel de Falla, and Malipiero and would render the greatest service to the art of the modern theatre.

It is, moreover, for marionettes that Manuel de Falla has written *El Retablo de Maese Pedro* which is perhaps his masterpiece. This is a very adroit adaptation of the text of Cervantes, describing the marionette performance given in the courtyard of the inn before Don Quixote. When the Moors rush out in pursuit of the faithful lovers, Don Quixote hurls himself upon the little theatre and tears it to pieces, singing the while a magnificent song expressive of all the heroism and nobility of his soul. I doubt whether a more authentic interpretation has ever been given of this character, so strange, so great, so sympathetic in his madness, so noble and so chivalrous in his visions.

The marionettes, who in themselves offer such an interesting synthesis of human gestures, are marvellously adapted to the modern repertoire in which living actors so often appear awkward, alien and even ridiculous. The musical marionette theatre seems to me to be one of the most interesting methods which have yet been offered us.

There may be a future in the combination of music with the cinema, but at present one can not yet see the emergence of a new art. In France, Henri Rabaud, Florent Schmitt and Arthur Honegger have composed music for important films, but these works, written to order, have not revealed any promise.

We are witnessing today every kind of effort on the part of the composer to do away with operatic convention and to invent new musical and dramatic forms. But however important may be the achievements of Schoenberg, Strawinsky, Ravel, Manuel de Falla, Malipiero, we can not yet say that a new aesthetic has been created, and nothing enables us to prophesy what form is destined to replace the dying opera.

