

RACE AND REVOLUTION

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THAT race is a controlling force in art is one of those general truisms that are universally accepted, but as universally open to misconstruction. A popular and persistent prejudice today holds that race is a stronghold of reaction. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, as a simple examination of the progress of modern music will disclose.

The three races whose individual characteristics have been least affected by their European environment are the Velikorossy or Great Russians (the people of Glinka and Moussorgsky, not of Tchaikovsky and Borodin), the Hungarians and the Jews. And it is just from these three that the musical revolution of the twentieth century has received its greatest impetus, through the contributions of Scriabin, Schönberg, Stravinsky, Bartok, Milhaud and Prokofieff.

Their race, not their nationality, fanned the revolutionary ardor of these composers. Generated in their blood, it was not nurtured in the well-trimmed and level pastures of civilized art, in the cultural psychology of their countries, but it overstepped and broke through the barriers of their national environment.

From the very start of their careers, Stravinsky, Prokofieff and Bartok, whose racial impulse is vigorous and clearly obvious, show the unmistakable signs of struggle against their heritage, against a mode of expression reflecting their local culture. The power of this inner racial impulse determines the outcome of the conflict and, as their gifts reach maturity, we see it triumph over the civilizations that nursed their genius. In the *Sacre*, in Prokofieff's *Scythian Suite*, and in Bartok's *Piano Concerto*, we witness this victory. Here the sources destructive to inherited cultural

habits, revealing new creative powers, can be seen almost in the act of springing from the soil of Velikoross and Magyar folk-dances. *Ceci a tué cela*, to use Hugo's solemn dictum.

Even more significant, if less openly violent, is the conflict between culture and creative urge in Schönberg, Scriabin and Milhaud. Educated according to the strictest regulations of civilization, they broke away more gradually but even more definitely; Scriabin from the comfortable Liszt factory, Schönberg from static and exhausted Tristanesque realms, and Milhaud from the post-Frankist coteries. With the arrival of creative maturity, the voice of race rises high and clear above the promptings of habit formed by the pressure of national culture.

Thus in Scriabin, racial vitality suddenly, illogically but inevitably, spurred him to the creation of those extraordinary whirligigs of music, the ecstatic voodoo dance-codas of his last sonatas and of *Prometheus*. These pages of the true, the essential Scriabin, reveal a deep kinship with the *radeniye* of certain Russian sects, those religious services that develop into orgies of dervish dances. Nothing could be more radically opposed to the whole cultural aspect, to the square, smooth, formal conceptions of Chopin and Liszt, his spiritual fathers.

Nor can we fail to recognize in Schönberg the nature of that fire which, kindling in his period of revolt, led him to destroy the established, *gemütlich*, European tonal structures topped, apparently with such finality, by Wagner. It is the high-strung restlessness, the unassuaged intellectual hunger of Schönberg's race which forever frets at local boundaries, striving for a super-national and inspired speech to break down cultural barriers in the way of its own spiritual domination.

As for Milhaud, with a definitely academic tendency of mind and the special musical inbreeding of his country, nothing but the power of his alien race could have veered his course from the safe fairway of comfortable Schola Cantorum production.

The difference between the two groups is clear. The revolution of Stravinsky and Bartok is race-conscious; while involuntarily and with painful struggle, Scriabin and Schönberg are driven by the inner force of race against their inheritance.

With the question of race in mind, let us for the moment try to isolate and define those elements of music which carry the germs of revolutionary modification. For melodic, harmonic and rhythmic means, let us use the term, *vocabulary*; for the laws governing the changes through which they pass, the collective expression, *etymology*; and for the formal relationships of the tonal units, *syntax*. In all the revolutionary developments of vocabulary, etymology and syntax in music, the force of race is seen to be peculiarly and persistently potent.

The perennial re-invigoration which race gives to the vocabulary and etymology of music is attested by one of the newest developments of our own time. The revolution created by jazz in the rhythmic conceptions of today has too often been misrepresented through false historical perspective. These modern rhythms are neither an isolated phenomenon nor solely a result of contemporary militant internationalism.

The synthetic rhythm of a Gershwin passage is no more advanced or international than the 11/4 structure in the chorus of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko*. Both are the expressions not of citizens of the world but of men impelled by their race. They belong in the same historic continuity and, more important, spring from the tree of racial art.

Not only the vocabulary and its manipulation in racial music, but also the syntax, are more pertinent to the boldness and flexibility of contemporary revolutionary art than is the canonized music of the Occident.

In the Irish folk-song, *The Next Market Day* (Boosey collection), for example, the basic structural formula, (a+b)+(b+b+a), has a freshness, a grace, and a bold fling of emphasis which make dry platitudes of our revered classical song formulas. The extraordinary structural daring in the savage songs of the Transcaucasian Huri tribe leaves today's masters of polyphonal speech far behind. This ancient music is a natural synthesis of both polytonal and polyrhythmic conceptions. In such tonal creations lie the germs of new and powerful stimuli. They contain the potential force to modify the syntax of all inner relations, to change the chemistry of the elements of music.

American music gives us an almost perfect illustration of fundamentals in the relations of race to revolution. Why is the art of America reactionary? Certainly not because the racial soil is too rich. In fact the racial factor is just what is needed to revolutionize the adopted musical syntax.

Wherever racial elements have appeared on the American scene they have created definitely disturbing currents. Even such hybrid native music as the assimilated American negro jazz rhythms and the Celtic-American melodies have impressed themselves on the music of the world, though they have entered through the back door, the music hall.

Such influences have been, of course, only superficial, because the racial background proved neither rich nor homogeneous enough to support a profound modification, a lasting growth. Perhaps America is still to give its true revolutionary expression to music. The original manifestations of its other arts, its daring spatial logic, as in the Grand Central Terminal, the powerful sweep of Walt Whitman's verse, are not these an indigenous and authentic racial evocation, the expression of a driving power emanating, if not from the soil of America, then from the spiritual atmosphere above it?