

# MODERN MUSIC

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## THE 1925-1926 SEASON

BY PITTS SANBORN

ACTIVITY is not always progress, though often mistaken for it, but the activity in the interest of modern music that New York displayed during the music season which has just closed may at any rate be accepted as a sign of health. Even the Metropolitan Opera House bore unwonted witness to the working of the modern leaven. When that stronghold of the what-has-been offers New York all in the same winter a Strawinsky "first time," a Carpenter "first time," and a Strawinsky revival, there can be no question that conservatism of the most "safe and sane" variety has looked upon the clangorous procession of the new in a spirit that nobody could term unfriendly.

Not that in this year of grace there is anything in the least revolutionary about these manifestations of the august Metropolitan. *Petrouchka*, now long familiar here, as elsewhere, has almost reached the status of a classic. Even the Strawinsky "novelty," *Le Rossignol*, though new to us as opera, had been heard here so often in concert that the edge of newness was well blunted. The Metropolitan merits cordial praise for the manner of the production; scenically and musically it was a lavish affair. And yet the shorter concert version, with Philomel voiced by Mr. Barrère's flute, instead of by the renowned soprano of Miss Marion Talley, is certainly the more persuasive. True, it omits most of the opening scene. But to that music Strawinsky, exercising a gracious comity, helped himself from Debussy's *Clouds* (and also, to a lesser degree, from *Pelléas et Mélisande*

and *La Mer*), as Debussy in his day had from Moussorgsky, so really, to the seasoned concert-goer, nothing is lost in the shorter version, while there is the gain of a soulful brevity. The rest of the work, with its *Chinese March*, whose theme is as old here as *The Glow Worm*, its continual and flattering references to Moussorgsky, its unabashed quotation from *Le Coq d'Or*, the tapestried smartness of its orchestration, was already well known thanks to the enterprise and persistence of Messrs. Walter Damrosch and Mengelberg.

*Skyscrapers*, admirable in its conception, proved musically a disappointment to at least one hearer who had liked Mr. Carpenter's *Birthday of the Infanta* and on that liking built his hopes high. This pantomime-ballet with the towering name ought to have been nothing short of overwhelming, but not for a single little moment did it threaten to bowl one over. Suppose Mr. Carpenter had tackled his native Chicago, instead of the Broadway-Coney Island combination—with its fatal invitation to imitate *Petrouchka*, and not for the better! But Mr. Carpenter did not, and in any case one is forced to suspect that the genre of the colossal city—be it Chicago or be it New York—is less congenial to his fancy than subjects akin in feeling to *The Birthday of the Infanta*. Still, the Metropolitan did well by us in remembering these compositions of important men of our own day, even though in presenting them it was far from daring greatly as it would if it were to stage the *Zwingsburg* of Ernst Krenek, for instance, or the *Wozzek* of Alban Berg. But as yet, in our chief fanes of the lyric drama, atonal opera has not passed beyond the accidental stage.

The same evening with *Le Rossignol*, the Metropolitan likewise introduced here, and in the Spanish language, Manuel de Falla's prize-winning opera of 1905, *La Vida Breve*. But that belated tribute to a country off the beaten track of opera and to a composer who long since outgrew the youthful ways that make for prizes was in vain. Rarely has an opera deserved a shorter life than this opera of the short life. This fact was especially obvious because a few weeks previously the League of Composers had presented on the stage of the Town Hall that miniature opera of de Falla's matured talent, *El Retablo de Maese*

*Pedro*. This production proved to be one of the unforgettable events of the winter. *El Retablo* itself is a delectable little work, beside which *La Vida Breve*, as Spanish opera, evaporates into nothingness, and Massenet's *Don Quichotte*, as an attempt to translate the Knight of the Rueful Countenance to the lyric stage, is, despite the puissant collaboration of such an artist as Feodor Chaliapin, quite unable to surmount the utter poverty of the score. The performance of *El Retablo* on this occasion, done in the manner of a glorified puppet show, with the singers seated in the orchestra, was quite as delectable as the opera itself. The conducting of Mr. Mengelberg and the playing by Mme. Landowska of the harpsichord (which figures prominently in de Falla's fine and individual orchestration) were important contributor's to the success of a production that ought to have been heard and seen repeatedly.

It would be easy to call this season one of music of the theatre. Besides modern operas and ballets that were staged, the name is related to one of the outstanding instrumental works—by Aaron Copland—and to Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, introduced here in concert form, at a session of the International Composers' Guild. The performance of *Les Noces*, though minus scenery and action, was musically most admirable. Leopold Stokowski conducted it with signal ability; Mrs. Charles Cahier headed the solo singers, and to play upon the four pianos were four composers, no less, Messrs. Casella, Enesco, and Salzedo, and Miss Tailleferre. The barbaric, relentless rhythm of this score and the unrelieved bombardment of the percussion battery, which included the pianos, reinforced by the shrieks and howls of the chorus and the soloists (such being a Russian peasant wedding!), unquestionably become monotonous when the ear must submit to them without ocular relief. Nevertheless, *Les Noces* is a score that counts immensely, even in the concert room, and memories of its savage throb have made not a little of the music that has been offered to us since seem eminently unimportant.

This nullification does not extend to the *Amériques* of Edgar Varèse, which Mr. Stokowski introduced at the final New York concert of the Philadelphia Orchestra. *Amériques* (one revels in its plural!) reached us in the company of an abundant exe-

genesis. The title, we were warned, is merely a guide to the spiritual impulse which initiated the work. We must detect in the music "man's aspiration toward the unknown worlds that he interrogates." At the same time, the planes and solids of geometry provide the mounting steps for his inquiring soul. And the atonal harmony, "crudely coloring the sound groups, thrusts them into formidable relief, like great masses imagined in astral space." Having called so much to witness, Mr. Varèse proceeded to make a great noise, and that very sonority, extracted from, among other engines of high audibility, a siren, at least one listener found quite superbly stunning. On the other hand, not a few of the occupants of Carnegie Hall became vastly indignant and expressed their approval in primitive fashion by hissing and booing. Now, there is something to be said for such manifestations; they at least indicate conviction and the courage thereof. But in this instance the hubbub was rather ridiculous, for *Amériques* stems so unmistakably from *Le Sacre du Printemps* that hissing it amounts to hissing the other, and our local audiences have lately seemed to be quite resigned to the existence of Strawinsky's tribute to the Russian spring, a state of mind that European audiences had attained before the World War! It is precisely because *Amériques* is so largely derivative—*Le Sacre* is not its only nourishing source—that in the sum of Mr. Varèse's work *Amériques* is probably (one can hardly be cautious enough about these matters!) less important than the far more problematic *Hyperprism* of another year. But let one who enjoyed the performance and applauded the work, because of its pages of commanding rhythm, of imposing sonority, express a very earnest hope that if hissing and booing are to become habitual with American concert audiences they will come to be directed with much more of discrimination; let us say, at the nine and ninetyeth performance within one month of the fifth or the sixth of Tschaikowsky's symphonies.

Curiously or not, it was Krenek who shared with Mr. Varèse the season's honors in hisses. The piece that provoked such attention was the second concerto grosso (led by Otto Klemperer in the course of his guesting with the New York Symphony). In spite of the terrors of its unkeyed counterpoint, this work

seemed by no means the sort of thing that the reactionaries like best to rage against, so one was forced to conclude that the mere name of Krenek, as a presumably important factor in musical *Schrecklichkeit*, must have been responsible for the outbreak.

Aaron Copland, to hark back to music for the theatre, enjoyed the rare and significant honor of a double performance. His *Music for the Theatre* (the title is not more definite) was introduced at a concert of the League of Composers and repeated at a Boston Symphony concert. On both occasions Mr. Koussevitzky conducted, with an enthusiasm for the music that was not to be mistaken. And it is music that deserves the enthusiasm. Mr. Copland writes with a sureness of touch and a personal authority that are rare indeed in composers of his youth. He has a keen feeling for rhythm and an extraordinarily fine sense of instrumental color, and the directness and economy of his style are singularly mature. He possesses irony and a delightful gift for burlesque, and intertwined with them is a vein of wistful, haunting melody. It is a high and deserved compliment to the intrinsic worth of Mr. Copland's *Music for the Theatre* that at a second hearing it made a still stronger impression than at the first.

If Messrs. Copland, Varèse, (the latter, though of European birth, for some years now a resident of this country,) and Carpenter provided the most ponderable matter of American origin, let us not forget that there was enough more performed from other American pens to give the season, in combination with theirs, a distinctively home-grown character. From Carl Ruggles, that interesting and least tamed of indigenous talents, came a new work for string orchestra, in twelve parts, entitled *Portals*; in uncompromising individuality it is one more testimonial to the integrity of the composer who gave us *Men and Mountains* and, before that, *Angels*. Early in the fall we had the widely discussed piano concerto of George Gershwin, which to some hearers would have been better Gershwin had it been less Liszt; others discovered in it a virtue hardly to be obtained from anything less momentous than a collaboration of Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, Bach, Beethoven, Strawinsky and St. Bene-

dict the Moor. Then there were Deems Taylor's *Jurgen*, less characteristic than his *Through the Looking Glass*, various pious liltings from the muse of C. M. Loeffler, a nice *Symphonic Piece* by H. F. B. Gilbert, a capital string quartet of Indian inspiration (at least in part) by Frederick Jacobi, and Emerson Whithorne's much lauded *Saturday's Child*, set to verses by the young Negro poet, Countee Cullen. The year's Americanism was attested to in a way that left no doubt as to the activity of the resident music-makers, or of their success in winning performances. Indeed we seem to have arrived at the happy pass where the director or the soloist who neglects the claims of American music is hopelessly and pitifully out of the fashion.

Of the many new European works introduced here during the last eight months, there were two which seemed to me of a craftsmanship superior to the rest. One was Paul Hindemith's *Klaviermusik*, Opus 37, introduced by Walter Giesecking at his recital at Carnegie Hall, a work more imaginative and interesting than any other so far imported from this young man's pen. The second was Alfredo Casella's *Concerto for String Instruments*, the most convincing of his compositions heard during the season, and in this writer's judgment, one of the best in his whole production. His was the only Italian music worthy of consideration. Respighi's *Pini di Roma* is undoubtedly excellent cinema stuff but not to be taken seriously from any point of view except that of the box office, and even this charity cannot be extended to the works of his young compatriots with which the Maestro Toscanini favored us.

The achievements of the season must not be dismissed without special mention of three of its events, each in its way of tendentious significance. One of these was the introduction on this side of the Atlantic, by the Friends of Music, of Arthur Honegger's "symphonic psalm," *Le Roi David*. True, eclecticism is a characteristic of this admirable score—an eclecticism that draws on Gounod and Puccini as well as on Bach, Handel and Stravinsky,—but it is a score that imposes itself; no matter what may be the origin of this or that constituent part, the whole work hangs together and drives its impression home to the listener with a triumphant thrust. It would be hard to think of another

modern work that has served so well as a persuader to the general. It has almost established the post-Strawinsky composer in the tranquil security of bourgeois respectability.

A second event which, though it incurred some passing ridicule, is not to be dismissed lightly was Henry Cowell's concert of plucked or stroked piano strings. Whether or not much is to be gained from this unwonted treatment of the wiry viscera of the pianoforte, the fact remains that Mr. Cowell is an experimenter of keen intelligence and complete seriousness, actuated by a desire to enlarge effectively the number of those instruments that may be used in the making of music. Third, last, and most important of all was the hearing given by the League of Composers to the Mexican inventor Julian Carillo and his practitioners in fractional tones. For a good many years we have been hearing more or less about the impending split-up of the semitone, and then there is Alois Haba (with Ernest Bloch in sequence) who has gone in for systematic exploitation of the quarter-tone. But Señor Carillo carries his investigation unto the eighth-tone and even the sixteenth. Whatever the upshot may be there is no sense in underrating the importance of his studies, whether their ultimate influence prove far-reaching or not. He is boldly entering territory that must be explored, even though the results should be less fruitful than the explorer may hope and the musical Tories may fear.

