

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

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## STRAVINSKY'S TWO-PIANO CONCERTO AND OTHER PARISIAN NOVELTIES

IT is quite plain that since the first performance (1921) of Prokofieff's *Third Concerto* in Paris, musicians have revised their opinions and taken a more favorable attitude towards the piano concerto. So far as the French school is concerned, the name of Maurice Ravel should again head the list. The little book on Ravel which Roland Manuel published in 1914 announced that this composer was preparing a piano concerto on Basque themes, to be entitled *Saspiak Bat*; this concerto was never written. But then again one can place Stravinsky just as legitimately at the head of the chronological list: in the heart of *Petrouchka* lies the hard kernel of a *Konzerstück* for piano and orchestra, which, it is true, immediately disappears behind the superficial charms of a ballet to which the taste of the day had given a rather excessive folkloric coloring.

Ravel and Stravinsky have always been among the completely rational, the intelligent musicians who have never believed that the constantly growing prestige of the orchestra could eclipse the more modest effulgence of the piano. Thus they have carried on, via Debussy, the very tradition of Schumann, Chopin and Liszt. The piano still remains a matchless instrument, and one to which Occidental music will long stay faithful. Even jazz has only strengthened its prestige.

The opening of the Paris season 1935-36 presented us with a splendid tribute to this attraction toward the piano concerto.

We refer to the premiere on November 21, 1935 of the *Concerto for Two Pianos*, without orchestra, by Igor Stravinsky. The composer and his youngest son, Soulima, played the work with the stamp of authenticity that one would expect. This

concerto continues the line of the other more or less concertant works of Stravinsky: the *Concerto* and the *Capriccio* for piano and orchestra, the *Concerto* for violin and orchestra, the *Sonata* and the *Sérénade* for piano solo, the *Duo Concertante* for piano and violin, and, I may add, the *Octet* for wind instruments. Here we have a group of works—seven in a period of thirteen years' production—which, different though they may be, do however pursue the same direction. It would be difficult to discover the origins of these works in anything Stravinsky wrote before *Mavra*. A few slight traces, at the very most, in *L'Histoire du Soldat* or the *Concertino*, might faintly forecast some of the characteristics of this new style. But Stravinsky's personality is far too complex for his music to be divisible into distinct styles. Boris de Schloezer regrets the absence of a certain mystery in his later works; but I, for one, distrust the apparent clarity which marks all of Stravinsky's music, recent or not. There are many undercurrents of which even the composer himself may be unaware. We are still far from understanding or even seeing clearly into Stravinsky's protean nature. Let it be revealed to us; it is sufficiently enthralling as it is.

To return to our subject, seven concert works for piano or violin have thus appeared among the orchestral works. The latter are either accompanied by a chorus or destined for the theatre. This point should be stressed: none of the orchestral works is, properly speaking, a pure symphony, or, even less, a symphonic poem; now chorus or soli, then a continued chant, or again, some choreographic pretext separates us from pure and absolute symphonic music. It is the *style concertante* which represents to Stravinsky, at least for the moment, the ideal medium for pure music.

There is another noteworthy feature. The *Concerto for Two Pianos*, begun before and finished after *Perséphone*, is of a style quite different from that work. We find here the ability great musicians have of cutting themselves in half and creating, practically at the same time, works of completely different style and character: I am thinking of Beethoven sketching his Italian Trio, *Tremate* while he was composing his *Second Symphony*, and finishing this same trio a dozen years later. The *Concerto*

may be counted among Stravinsky's most polyphonic works. In spite of the fact that the polyphony appears in a specifically pianistic garb, it contains some formidable superpositions which, in order to keep the feeling of ensemble, demand all the clarity of writing and harmonic intuition the composer possesses. One finds in these passages a certain grandiose quality, peculiar to polyphonic art, which one scarcely expects in the piano. But however pianistic the writing may be, it nonetheless suggests, as always is the case with Stravinsky, a certain dryness expressive of the wind instruments. A motif which passes from the first movement to one of the variations is characteristic. The whole first movement has the heroic quality of the *Sinfonia* at the beginning of the *Octet*, but without its emotional divertissement. In these opening pages Stravinsky's powers of eloquence and exaltation are at their peak. The *Nocturne* which follows offers a rather Rossinian prettiness, exquisite and delicate. The work ends with a *Fugue*, which is preceded by a set of variations, composed afterward, utilizing two motifs, one of which is the subject of the fugue. Each variation, very short, presents a different shade of Stravinsky's feeling. We find amazing abridgements which have nothing to do with the variations of the *Octet*. One variation, with its great heavy pachydermal tread, takes us back to the atmosphere of the *Sacre*, but to an amazingly condensed *Sacre*. As to the *Fugue*, it follows the heroic élan of the first movement and finishes quite unexpectedly. The most remarkable part of the whole work is its sense of form; one thinks of the last sonatas of Beethoven, with their elisions, their phrases suspended in mid-air or as if enclosed in parentheses, the thread breaking off, then joining again, without ever being lost.



Wanda Landowska, by slyly insinuating the pinched timbre and the tinkle of the harpsichord into the musical taste of the day, has attracted strange sympathizers to this instrument. Manuel de Falla, Francis Poulenc, Vittorio Rieti, Bohuslav Martinu, and even Florent Schmitt, have undertaken to compose for this instrument. Here again Claude Debussy preceded his followers: for he planned a sonata (the fourth) linking harpsichord with the oboe and the horn.

Francis Poulenc, composer of the *Concert Champêtre* for harpsichord with orchestra—a milestone in his career—has remained faithful to this instrument. He has just used it anew in two pieces of stage music, one for a play by Bourdet, *Margot*, with scenes laid in the sixteenth century, and the other for an animated cartoon in colors, a fairy tale to advertise Vins Nicolas. In both cases he has managed to achieve a sonority, now sad now gay, which is characteristic of the harpsichord and also of Poulenc. At times there crop up features which ape Landowska's playing of ancient music, but generally speaking (if one looks beyond the harpsichord, the adaptations of sixteenth century music and all the pastiches), the work shows a fidelity to Poulenc's own style. Few musicians have been able to make use of a lost instrument—I am thinking also of Stravinsky's tympanon—and have mastered it to such a degree. It is true of course that in both the composer and the instrument profited by an excellent interpreter.

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The *Harpsichord Concerto* of Bohuslav Martinu has the musical, and especially rhythmic quality, that one finds in all the deliberately gauche and slyly correct works of this Czech composer. I cannot see that the harpsichord gains anything by being subjected to these rigors, or, for that matter, that Martinu gains anything by using the harpsichord. Any other plucked instrument would have done the trick. In this respect, one can see that Martinu has remained a "modern" and cannot adapt himself to any kind of classicism, true or false, which demands the use either of an ancient instrument or of an ancient form. The *Concerto* is, nevertheless, musically interesting: the man is there, honest, candid, and with a peasant-like freshness. I know of few composers with such rhythmic spontaneity, or with such abundance without excess.

A *Sonatina* of Florent Schmitt for flute, clarinet and harpsichord, the last avatar, it would seem, of flageolet pieces, reminds one of a bear trying his hand at fine watchmaking. But since the bear is fairly adroit and the flute and clarinet have no secrets for Florent Schmitt, everything comes out all right. But what a pity that Debussy never wrote his *Sonata* for harpsichord, oboe

and horn! What fugitive, tenuous sonorities he would have drawn from the harpsichord!

*André Schaeffner*

### NEW YORK'S SPRING SEASON, 1936

I DO not find that the prevailing atmosphere at a Composers' Forum Laboratory concert is conducive to the spirited performance of a composer's works or the reaction hoped for by the composer from his audience. Say what you like, there is an indefinable spirit of gloom which pervades the hall, an apathy which seems to hold both performers and audience in its grip. Discussion is encouraged at the end of each concert in the form of questions written by the audience concerning the composer and his attitude towards his work. These questions turn out to be for the most part trivial or impertinent, the idle pastime of vacant minds. I am always absent when an intelligent question has been brilliantly answered.

With all due respect to different composers for whom I have admiration, it must be said that the programs are only too often made up of works significant only because they indicate certain stages in the course of development of the composer represented. One program reads very much like another; a few piano pieces, a few songs, a string quartet. . . .

The program of the works of Marc Blitzstein was interesting, for, while made up chiefly of early works, it contained as center of gravity the *Piano Concerto* (1932), an excellent and well constructed piece of music. One feels in it primarily a preoccupation with form; the material is perhaps too thoroughly worked out, especially in the double passacaglia which constitutes the last movement. It was difficult to estimate its real value when played for two pianos. As far as I could judge from the score, the orchestra is handled with brilliance and a decidedly personal feeling for instrumentation. Blitzstein has a freshness at times which is most attractive, as I remember from the music which he wrote for Steiner's film, *Surf and Seaweed*. There is no need to obscure this desirable quality with a superstructure of elaborate technical devices.