

LAZARE SAMINSKY

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THE modified Festival Saminsky at the French Institute, on December 17, 1934, presented a panorama of Saminsky's compositions and adaptations, from his early days as a post-graduate in old St. Petersburg, through his various avatars as a Russian, Hebrew and American composer. Of the early works, there were songs full of luscious ninth-chords; there were piano-pieces of the period of transition; there were excerpts from the cantata-pantomime, *Daughter of Jephtha*. There were two psalms, and several adaptations of the ancient Chassidic melodies, chants of Caucasian Jews, and others, collected during his sojourn in the Caucasus and later during his travels in the East as a member of the ethnological expedition of Baron de Guinsbourg.

Saminsky has written five symphonies, several stage-works, many songs. Curiously enough, he has not written any chamber music—although he has the taste and feeling for the medium of a chamber orchestra. In fact, his most successful composition, the *Litanies of Women*, is written for voice and small orchestra. The number of performances of this work has been surprisingly large, particularly, when we consider the fact that his symphonies remain practically unperformed. *Ausonia*, a set of Italian impressions, is also written for a reduced orchestra; its premiere is scheduled in Italy this February, appropriately so, for Ausonia is Virgil's poetic name for Italy.

The small orchestra, with its individualized timbres, and diaphanous sonorities, is Saminsky's happiest medium. His predilection for shifting the orchestra into high gear—creating at times an impression of orchestral falsetto and making one yearn for chest-tone—is most fitting in this cycle of songs to verses

written by women. Even the cymbals are small Egyptian cymbals in this diminutive wonderland. Occasionally low-tone unisons of the piano and bass-clarinets (which combination is one of Saminsky's happy finds) come to relieve the music-box sonority. In harmony, melody and rhythm one discovers Saminsky's familiar formulae: the Debussyan choreic "ictus" (a sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth), rapid groups of five notes, rambling through unresolved appoggiaturas; triads in enharmonic sequence, all these as foils for broad, songful melody . . . Whether such music meets the fashion of the day, is another matter; most probably, it does not,—yet the unassuming charm of these *Litanies*, with just the right dose of modernism, makes the work accessible to the general public, and interesting enough to the soloist and conductor to be placed on any program anywhere. Thus the *Litanies* were presented at a concert of American music in Venice, although by no stretch of imagination could this work be called American.



Saminsky's stage-works, *Gagliarda of a Merry Plague* and *Daughter of Jephtha*, have none of the gentleness of the *Litanies*. The triads all but disappear, while the seconds (and mostly minor seconds!) are pounded with uncompromising zeal. Ernest Newman, coming as a guest-critic in New York to a performance of the *Gagliarda*, poked fun at Saminsky's use of a death-rattle in the form of a bag of dried-up oyster shells. In a sense these dry shells, evolving from the Egyptian cymbals of the *Litanies*, are as significant as the atavistic growth of a claw out of a fingernail in the evolutionary laboratories of H. G. Wells's fantastic *Island of Doctor Moreau*.

Of the symphonies, the most significant is the *Fourth*. The very opening, based on a motif of eight unrepeated notes (E, G-A in a Debussyan ictus, F#, F, ascending by fourths to Bb and Eb, receding to D for a tonal cadence into G) shows that Saminsky has traveled a long way from the modified tonality of his earlier symphonies. (The tonality of the *First* is marked *E frimoll*,—not a fortunate neologism for "free minor mode;" the second, *H-fridur*; the tonality of the *Third Symphony* has been

described as "a free play of A major and E major" in Joseph Yasser's article, *Saminsky as Symphonist*.)

The Neapolitan sixth, which is a frequent participant in Saminsky's harmonic schemes, loses its cadential functions in the *Fourth Symphony*, and other compositions of the same period. It is presently transformed into a minor sixth-chord, resolving into the major dominant of the previous minor key into which the former Neapolitan sixth, now happily transfigured, would have resolved. This may sound too abstruse for the simple progression of a G# minor sixth-chord to a D major triad, but has not Browning described the resolution of a chord of the augmented sixth and doubly augmented fourth into a six-four major chord in resounding hexameter verse?

The significance of Saminsky's use of the Neapolitan chord is further demonstrated by its position between two diatonically adjacent major triads:

C major, G# minor sixth-chord, D major.

Even this may appear unrevealing, unless we take note of the fact that the three triads are mutually exclusive, so that they lend material for nine-tone progressions based on the principle of non-repetition. In other words, here we have the method designed primarily for the use of atonality (in the sense that J. M. Hauer uses the word), employed for tonal purposes. To quote an example from a different source: Roy Harris makes use of the principle of non-repetition for tonal purposes in the subject of his fugue in the *Trio*, with a cadential figure in a B minor triad.



Saminsky's choral writing merits special discussion which is beyond the limits of this review. The program on December 17 included the settings of two Psalms, *By the Rivers of Babylon* and *The Lord Reigneth*. As leader of the Temple Emanu-El choir, Saminsky has acquired ample practical knowledge of the powers and limitations of choir singing. In writing for the voice he does not unreasonably strain its potentialities, and his harmonies enhance the chant rather than contradict it in dissonant counterpoint. In other words, Saminsky writes performable music par

excellence, as far as the choral treatment is concerned. The Bloch Publishing Company of New York has issued two collections of Saminsky's service music, the *Sabbath Morning Service*, opus 31, and *Holiday Service*, opus 32 to which we refer those interested in modern choral writing for the synagogue.

The composer's interests are not confined to musical activities. In his student days he was attracted by subjects as widely divergent as mathematics and philology. Nor were these the inclination of a dilettante; he wrote learned papers on the subject of new geometrical conceptions and translated the Latin treatises of Descartes into Russian. In America, having mastered one more language, he took to lecturing and writing books. In his recent volume, *Music of the Ghetto and the Bible*, he describes a Jewish composer in exile as "a dolorous figure," incapable of true assimilation, squandering his energies in an alien field. No composer of Jewish blood may aspire to express fully an adopted nation's soul: his only salvation is to strive towards creation of great Jewish music, something as Jewish as Beethoven's *Ninth* is German. . . . Thus speaks Saminsky. To the musically minded, the question of interest is whether this Jewish or non-Jewish music will be progressive and inventive, or else will revert to the original folk-lore in a glorified monotone. Saminsky's own music, as in the *Daughter of Jephtha*, leaves us in no doubt as to his own belief: that all national music must be constantly vitalized by new harmonies in order to live.