

MORE AND MORE FROM PARIS

VIRGIL THOMSON

SAUGUET's *Chartreuse de Parme* has finally opened. The invited dress-rehearsal was a flop. The premiere four nights later was a triumph. Four subscription-night performances before and three after Easter made seven in one season, the maximum that any work can receive without its being repeated to the same subscribers. Dupont's *décors* are universally admired. The cast and execution are superb, the ballet first-class.

La Chartreuse contains eleven scenes. These do not follow any very consistent plot or intrigue. They depict certain high spots in a panoramic novel that hasn't itself a very continuous plot.

All the politics are omitted (Beethoven would certainly have done an overture about the Battle of Waterloo) and the love-life of Fabrice del Dongo is made the center of the play. It ends with lots of mutual renunciation, the final scene being Fabrice's farewell sermon before taking to the Carthusian monastery and accepting the vow of eternal silence. In the book this sermon is just a bluff to see Clelia again. It works; they go off together and have several children. The turning of an anti-religious, Napoleonic-political novel into a glorification of sweet-sentiment and piety has enraged the Stendhalian, of course. That is not very important to the music world. I presume the Goethians were pretty upset about what Gounod and his librettist did to *Faust*, and we know what Maeterlinck thought about *Pelléas and Mélisande*. What is important is that with all the trouble Henri Sauguet and Armand Lunel gave themselves to get the book on to the stage at all, the result is not any form of dramatic effectiveness that we are used to. The dialog lacks pep, in spite of the use wherever possible of Stendhal's text, and there is no action. The whole thing is rather like a recital in costume.

It is intimate like a recital. I mean the music is intimate and

interior, like lieder music. The continuity is all in the vocal line, which is almost hysterically sensitive and emotional. The accompaniment is discontinuous. It progresses by spurts of lyrical enthusiasm. It dies, as sentiments die, each time the lyric spurt is out and over. There is no sustaining-pattern, no long-line musical build-up. The whole musical texture vibrates and quivers with the emotional tension of the characters on the stage. The bottom drops out of it every time an emotional tension is loosened.

This intimate duet between singer and accompaniment is sheer lieder or song-technic. Classic theatrical procedure is opposed to it. Because there is no use pretending that an actor on a stage and an orchestral ensemble in a pit are playing a duet. The simple facts are otherwise, as long as duet means something done by two people. There can be conversation between the stage and the orchestra, yes, as in a solo concerto, and antiphony as in a *concerto grosso*. There can be submission of one to the other. They can even agree on a tune in a *tutti*. Anything approaching a real duet, which supposes sonorous equality, is rare and difficult.

A theatre orchestra, whether it is playing in full symphonic texture, as in Wagner, or just imitating a "big guitar," as Wagner is supposed to have described Donizetti's instrumentation, has a function beyond that of mere accompaniment. It must not only explain the harmony and keep the singers on pitch. It must sustain the whole show. It must frame everything and give it continuity. Once it does that you can add all the fanciness you like in the form of vocal roulades, musical scene-painting, symphonic commentary and character-depiction. You can even get away with a bit of emotional identification if you are careful about it, as Debussy was. Beethoven didn't know the trap, didn't know the orchestra had to keep outside the characters, did emotional identification all over the place, lost all the drama, wrote three overtures trying to get it back in.

The composer who uses his orchestra to depict what his characters are thinking about all the time can achieve a considerable intensity in solo numbers and sometimes a real intimacy in the duets. He is up a tree in concerted scenes, because he can't be everybody at the same time. And the whole show is up a tree unless the accompaniment has some objectivity, which is the

essence of dramatic narration, and a good deal of structural continuity, which is the first dimension of music, as it is of any art that deals in time.

All musicians know the subtlety of the interplay that takes place between a good recital-singer and his accompanist, between a true song-line and its instrumental clothing. The two are not one, but they have one subject which they treat with all the mutual understanding, all the intimacy of a true married pair. The lied is the most sensitive kind of music in the world and very nearly the most personal. It is very difficult to put on a stage. Sauguet's achievement (the thing that has shocked so many of his critics) is that he has got it on to the stage. His lied-technic is at its best, of course, in the solo numbers and the love conversations. It got in his way frightfully in the larger scenes. He finally scrapped it altogether for the final church-scene and broadened the whole effect considerably by the systematic use of choral interjections and the employment of a sustained and independent orchestral accompaniment that represents the scene itself rather than what some character on the stage is feeling about something. In consequence, what the characters do feel, and express vocally, becomes very clear indeed and quite moving, thrown into relief as it is against a background of contrasting music.

Whenever a work appears that has fresh musical quality and any slight variation from routine esthetic procedures, the routine musicians always bring out that old one about how it shows talent but the author should really take some more lessons. Reynaldo Hahn did a jeremiad on that text in *Le Temps* and Vuillermoz dittoed in *Candide*. They complained that the harmony was incorrect, the orchestration muddy, the prosody inexact. Suppose so, then what? The work has still more carrying power, more real acuity, musical, theatrical and human than any other opera written by a Frenchman that has seen the light since the war. And the Opéra alone produces at least one a year. As Auric pointed out in *Marianne*, it is a real honest-to-God grand opera. It is a sincere work (nobody has questioned that) in a noble form and it gets over to the public. In the face of that who am I to say the libretto ought to be less static and who is Reynaldo Hahn to pretend he could have written the music for it any better?

I was wrong in a previous issue of this magazine to credit *La Chartreuse* with any relation to Verdi or Gounod. It is too introspective for that. Musically it is nearer to Schumann, with overtones of Fauré and Delibes and Ambroise Thomas. Theatrically it is straight seventeenth century—statuesque declamation of great sensitivity, in front of splendid and sumptuous scenery (at least that's the idea), visual movement being provided at one moment by the interpolation of a completely stylized ballet.

The surprising result of all this staticness is that the work is a wow over the radio. Lack of stage-movement is an advantage for broadcasting. A speaker (or speakerine, the feminine form of that new French noun) can easily occupy ten longish intervals telling all the story that got left out of the play. And musical intimacy, of course, is the best thing the radio does. (Just think of crooning.) *La Chartreuse de Parme* is probably (and quite unintentionally) the first satisfactory full-evening radio-opera in any language.



It was a pleasure to hear Milhaud's *L'homme et son désir* again. Scherchen conducted. I had last heard it at the Swedish Ballets. It is a work of great musical abundance, full of harmonic delicacies, fine instrumental precisions, and a real dramatic amplitude. It is a pleasure to find it as savory after all these years as the same composer's *Saudades do Brasil* and *La Création du Monde* have remained. Milhaud was in those days for the general public, and even for most musical observers, just another young man of talent, a bright young man among other bright young men. Today he is France's No. 1 composer. He has achieved that position by writing a great deal of music and a great deal of very fine music. He has enriched every branch of musical literature. In addition, he has traveled continuously on errands of musical propaganda, he has lectured, written articles and befriended the young. Scarcely a talent in France that has not passed unofficially through his hands. For twenty years he has discovered everybody, counseled everybody, seen to it that everybody got launched. His musical comprehension and personal kindness are extraordinary. His professional loyalty is

unique. It would be nice if the United States owned either a composer of that power or as enlightened a professional musician.

On the same program was a *Concerto for Two Pianos and Percussion* by Bartok. Composer and wife performed. I have never been able to find much music in Bartok. I didn't find much in this piece either. The melodic material isn't very interesting and the trick sonorities only about half come off. *Concerto* isn't perhaps the right name for the piece, because the two-piano team and the percussion-battery don't really play antiphonally. The battery is used rather to augment and to extend deceptively the normal pianistic sonorities. This would come off better if everybody were playing behind a screen or over the air. On a concert platform it is quite useless to pretend that four people and about twenty instruments are just one great big instrument, when everybody can see that it is really a man and a lady playing on two ordinary grand pianos with a couple of chums from the musicians' union behind them being very busy at kettledrums and xylophones and such. After all, the piece is either a concerto or it isn't. My story is that it isn't. Also that it is not very successful at being a sonata for two pianos with supplementary percussion. In addition to which, its musical texture of outmoded international-style bang-bang gives the work the air of being an act of devotion to a lost stylistic cause rather than a direct expression of any very spontaneous musical ideas.

As a Lenten penitence, I presume, La Sérénade put on an extremely painful concert of religious music at which some quite good pieces were played. Olivier Messiaen played the organ as well as I have ever heard the organ played in my life and a ladies' chorus sang rather less vaguely than ladies' choruses usually sing. Satie's *Messe des Pauvres* (for organ) opened the evening. It is an early work not unlike *Les Sonneries de la Rose Croix* only rather more extensive and more varied, a work of profoundly original musical imagination. Another organ piece, *Paraphrase* by Claire Delbos (Madame Olivier Messiaen) pleased me a great deal. It is intended for use in churches on all occasions when the end of the world is a subject of the day. It is full of interesting chaos. There was Sauguet's *Petite Messe Pastorale* for two-part chorus, simple and gracious. Also a

couple of Poulenc motets, cute but ordinary, and a fine seventeenth century organ-piece, all full of scales, called *Dialogue sur les Grands Jeux* by Nicholas de Grigny (1671-1703).

The concert's painfulness was due partly to the lighting-system of the *Eglise de la Trinité* and partly to a very long organ-work by Messiaen called *La Nativité du Seigneur*. This is in six sections and lasts (so it seemed to me) easily forty minutes. Messiaen has plenty of routine skill at composition and a lively imagination about sonorities. He knows everything you can do with a theme and he wouldn't think of stopping a piece till he has done it all. The themes themselves tend toward the chromatic and the flaccid, and his figuration is wiggly. The harmony is pleasantly discordant at the top and pretty motionless at the bottom, being built, like nine-tenths of all French conservatory-style music, on motionless "goose-egg" (or whole-note) bases. The sonorities and chord-placements are admirably calculated. I fancy the whole thing comes off just about as he intends it to, except for the little matter of not holding the audience's attention. When the finale wound up with what I must admit is a million-dollar postlude-toccata, I realized what his model is, consciously or unconsciously. It fits in perfectly that he should be such a superb organist. He is another Charles Marie Widor. France could use another Widor just now. An ornament to the profession he was. But between that kind of routine supermastery and the sensitive clumsiness of Sauguet's little home-made opera, home-made but hand-stitched every measure of it, the palm goes definitely to Sauguet.

■

The kids who had that kind of prodigious musical ability when I was growing up are mostly teaching harmony now. The exception by the grace of God is Henri Cliquet-Pleyel, the only first-class composer I have ever known who ever had anything approaching a first-class musical talent. Milhaud and Satie tried to make a white-hope out of him fifteen years ago but it didn't work. He didn't care enough about it to go through the career-routine. All he cares about is writing music. I announced two issues ago a description of his suite for orchestra and soprano voice, *Espagne*. There is now another piece of about the same

length for piano and orchestra called *Transbaikal*, concert paraphrase on a Siberian melody.

Every French composer who takes himself seriously has to write a piece about Spain before he dies. In a pinch Hungary or the United States will do but Spain is preferable, because the Viennese long ago took over Hungary as their own territory, and the United States is still pretty indigestible to everybody, including its own sons. (The jazz fugue in Milhaud's *Création du Monde* and Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever* I should place as just about tops so far in Americana.) The proof of success in this sort of musical exoticism is fooling the natives. It is hard to imagine Mozart's *Turkish March* or Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* provoking much nationalistic warmth in Istanbul or Aberdeen, or Stravinsky's *Rag-Time* sending the alligators in Kansas City. Berlioz did just that, however, in Budapest, drove them wild with his version of the *Rakoczy-March*; and Bizet's *Carmen* has been accepted in Spain for fifty years as a masterpiece. They take Chabrier's *España*, too, over there and Ravel's *Bolero* without blinking. I don't know how often Debussy's *Iberia* can be heard today beyond the Pyrenees, but certainly de Falla's *Nuits dans les jardins d'Espagne* is proof that at least one high-class really Spanish composer considered it tops. I don't know how long it will be before Cliquet-Pleyel's *Espagne* is loved (or even heard) in Spain. I know that for me, who have heard (and loved) a lot of so-called Spanish music on both sides of the Pyrenees, the work is both convincing and moving.

The Spain it depicts is the Spain I know, not the Spain of Goya's day or of Bizet's. It is the Spain of our century, of our decade, of the Civil War years even,—rich, wretched, sumptuous, starving, vulgar, bored and passionate. The text by Robert Got is brief, straightforward, meditative. It serves chiefly as a pretext for vocal interjections in the gypsy (or flamenco) style. The dance-rhythms are all either slower or faster than normal. The *bolero* parts sound like a military *pavane*, a half-time *polonaise*. The *fandango* and the *paso doble* are more furious than any *tarantella*. There are references also to the religious and family life of Spain in the form of over-rich ecclesiastical

passages and sugary bits of international movie-sentiment. The dominating matter is a massive and funereal *bolero* interspersed with religious and sentimental moments of deliberate charm and interrupted by long florid cries of the most heart-rending pathos. A Siberian melody from beyond Lake Baikal could hardly be treated, even in Moscow, in an authentic regional style. Cliquet-Pleyel's variations contain indeed, certain conventional references to Tartary, quite a few in fact. But the Tartary they refer to is the Tartary of picturesque violence, the Tartary we know mostly from song and story and Borodine. The piece has a bit of *Prince Igor* and not a little of Balakirev's further-south *Islamey*. All that is beside the point, because the work lives not by its exoticism but by its virtuosity. It is a twenty-minute display of orchestral, pianistic and compositional brilliance. Does that sound dull? It isn't. Because of its terrific abundance of musical ideas. It is amazing how much real music there is to the square inch of audibility. It is a pleasure to hear in our day music of the Mozart dosage. There is no didacticism in it, just power and fecundity. And nothing approaching anywhere either a voluntary or an involuntary stylization.

Cliquet-Pleyel's lack of any stylistic limitations has always been rather shocking, as the same lack was most certainly shocking in Mozart's day to Mozart's contemporaries. That kind of workman has no reserves, no major limits and no esthetic principles. His style consists of nothing more than his enormous repertory of device and his ability to get out of any known technical jamb. His music doesn't fatten on literary poesy or have an air of intellectual distinction or illustrate any pedagogical principle whatever about how music should or should not be written. It is just music all the way through. And the test of its quality is its degree of concentration, its number (by actual count) of sound musical ideas per page.

POST-SCRIPTA

The French government decided last spring to relieve unemployment among composers by commissioning works from the following: Charles Koechlin, Darius Milhaud, Germaine Taillefer, Marcel Delannoy, Yvonne Desportes, Henri Barraut, Elsa Barraine.

No performance is provided. Composers will get their works performed or not as they are able. The choice of composers would seem to have been made with a good eye to artistic distinction, and youth is not neglected. How much employment or real financial need there is among those chosen I cannot verify.

Milhaud speaks well of Elsa Barraine's *Symphonie*. His own contribution is a one-act *Medea*, text out of Euripides and Seneca by Madeleine Milhaud. *Medea* seems to be everybody's favorite legend in this decade, as *Orpheus* was of the 1920's. Milhaud's version is scheduled at the Opéra (vaguely next fall) with *décors* (probably) by André Masson (a presumably unemployed painter).

L'Académie Nationale de Musique et de Danse, commonly known as the Opéra, has announced the intention of sending its excellent troupe to visit New York and Chicago during the World's Fair. Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* is to head the repertory. Don't miss. You will like also the ballet-girls and boys. They are in fine shape these days.

La Société des Concerts du Conservatoire (Muench directing) gave an American evening at the Sorbonne. It was really a New England evening, since the program consisted of works by MacDowell, Converse, Hill, Piston, R. Thompson and A. Copland. (Yes, dear reader, Copland is a New England composer, because he studied with Boulanger, the Boston Symphony is his chief interpreter, and he once even taught a half-year at Harvard.)

Duke Ellington has just filled the *Théâtre Nationale Populaire* in the *Palais de Chaillot* (the new Trocadero) twice in one week at a 100-franc top. The hall seats three thousand persons. The orchestra consists of fourteen musicians. The press is one long rave.

I am told that Vienna has gone in for speakeasies where one can hear real swing-music and dance the Lambeth Walk.