

TRADITION IN FRENCH MUSIC¹

ALTHOUGH in the course of the centuries changes in our social structure, and a thousand other diverse incidents, have modified our French music, nevertheless one can say that in it there persist certain permanent characteristics, which are likewise characteristics of France as a nation. Taken together, these constitute tradition as it is found in our national art. This tradition may be defined in a single word: it is essentially *classic*, a term the exact signification of which will presently be explained more fully.

French music is of very ancient origin. Naturally there is extant no written document from the Gallo-Roman period nor from still earlier times. But we may obtain an idea of the character of this early music from the old popular airs of Brittany, a province where the traditions of the past are piously respected and where these songs have been handed down from father to son for many generations. We may also obtain an idea of its character from the divers themes of the Gregorian chant, that precious heritage from the religious music of the Middle Ages. Certain historians think that these themes are descended from the melodies of ancient Greece. At any rate, it is true that this music is most often written in scales which are the same as those used in classic Hellas. It has, in general, a religious character which is remarkable for the nobility and elevation of its feeling. This same religious character may be seen in

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many of the works of modern French composers. Religious or philosophical earnestness is characteristic of France as a nation, notwithstanding the fact that those who know this nation only on the surface have sometimes been tempted to see in her only bland superficiality and frivolity.

The French music of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance is not all religious. The four-part songs of the sixteenth century show another side of our art. They are descriptive and martial, as is, for instance, *La Bataille de Marignan* by Clément Jannequin; or they are sprightly, clever, and comic, as are those of Claude le jeune and Claudin de Sermizy. Traces of the martial tradition appear in modern French music, notably in Reyer's *Sigurd* and d'Indy's *Fervaal*. As for the comic and humoristic qualities of the music of the Middle Ages, they persist in certain of our popular airs as well as in many a work by our most recent composers, from Chabrier to Ravel and Erik Satie.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the opera and the religious and secular cantatas, written to please the king or other persons of noble birth, offer a less popular and more restrained style of music. The very refinements of the court for which it was composed rob it of that powerful touching quality which only a soul overwhelmed with grief, passion, or ecstatic joy can breathe into artistic forms. Musical art becomes thoroughly classic in its purity of line, its clarity of style, and its choice of media. Lulli, then Rameau, were the most celebrated musicians of this period. The latter, by the boldness of his harmonies and also by the freedom of his rhythm, closely approaches our own age. Rameau foresaw the great importance of chords in musical language. On this point he met with violent opposition, particularly from the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who claimed that Rameau had made his accom-

paniments too interesting and that the melodic expression suffered from this "learned" writing. This is a very grave error, which Saint-Saëns has refuted in masterly fashion in his best book, *Harmonie et Mélodie*. He says that pleasing harmonies are as much the fruit of inspiration as are beautiful melodies, and that "learning" has nothing to do with the case.

Still it is true that the successors of Rameau were unable to equal his virile yet supple technique. Musical composition became impoverished. At the time of the French Revolution this tendency to slight the accompaniment was accentuated. When the music is sustained by an outburst of genius, as in the *Marseillaise* by Rouget de Lisle or in the *Chant du Départ* by Méhul, it remains strong and vivacious; but in other works, the too great simplification of the harmonic and contrapuntal writing has resulted in anæmia. For this reason the sudden appearance of Berlioz caused a storm of protest. Berlioz, in whom the Romanticist revolt was seething, is a bond in our music between the past and the present. He is a modern in his broader *sensibilité*, an outgrowth of that which was displayed by the philosophers of the eighteenth century and of the Revolution; he is modern, too, in his boldness, in his new discoveries in the realm of tone, and in his romantic love of nature. But he remains classic, thoroughly French, in his happy feeling for proportion, and in the fact that although he has written vast sonorous symphonies, he is concise, not delaying his thought by useless prattling.

The same is true of Gounod, who has, besides these general characteristics of classicism, a great charm which is of the purest French tradition. It is the charm of our Renaissance *châteaux*, of our Louis XV style, of Racine, Rameau, Renan, and Anatole France,—that same charm which pervades the music of Debussy and Gabriel Fauré.

These two qualities, boldness of invention and compelling charm, joined with those characteristics which are peculiar to classicism in art, are still to be seen in our modern composers. The thread of tradition may easily be traced from Bizet's *Carmen*, Chabrier's *Le Roi malgré lui*, and Henri Duparc's admirable songs to the works of Debussy, Gabriel Fauré, and Ravel.

But our modern musical production is too abundant for me to analyze it in detail. Having already indicated the principal characteristics of tradition, I shall attempt merely to study the contribution which our contemporary composers have made to the realm of music.

I have already mentioned the social influences which have been operative. First, there were the philosophers of the eighteenth century, the French Revolution, and the activity of modern thought in the nineteenth century. All this has made us conceive an art at once freer and more human, directing us toward still newer discoveries. Second, there was Romanticism; the art of the nineteenth century as typified in Verlaine, Van Lerberghe, Jules Lafforgue, Gauguin, and Rodin; and a love of nature going even to a kind of pantheism which has its beginning in Mallarmé's *Après-midi d'un Faune* (so admirably set to music by Debussy) and which is related also to that of your own great Walt Whitman. This love of nature may be seen, too, in the predilection for long voyages, to which so many French musical works bear testimony: *Le Désert* by Félicien David, *La Nuit Persane* by Saint-Saëns, *Mârrouf* by Henri Rabaud, the beautiful *Evocations de l'Inde* by Roussel, the admirable *Asie* by Ravel, and my own *Poèmes*, based on Kipling's *Jungle Book*.

The music of other periods has not infrequently had a happy influence upon our modern composition. Important is that intimate knowledge of the works of Beethoven, of

Mozart, and especially of J. S. Bach, which aided us in developing an easy flexibility of style for the clear expression of our national *sensibilité*. Such a style has been best conceived by one of the greatest composers of the nineteenth century, César Franck, a Belgian by birth, though a naturalized Frenchman. Another influence is that of the Russians, notably Moussorgski, who is the most human of them all. The choral art of the sixteenth-century composers and our artistic old popular airs have not been without an influence on our modern music. All of these forces have been melted together in the crucible of our national inspiration.

From all this there has been born among us a new music, which, though classic in its general qualities, has become, on the other hand, daring, free, and diverse. But its very audacity is only the generalization of the bold innovations of our old masters and of their free conception of counterpoint, by which I mean supple and flowing melodic composition for several voices.

New chords, new melodies, new rhythms and developments, even new *genres*, have appeared. We believe that to-day our young French music, at once faithful to the traditions of the past and looking to the freest of futures, to the most luminous horizons, will not halt its rapid advance, even though the pace has by force of circumstances been slackened during the war. Many of our artists were mobilized; cruel gaps have appeared in our ranks. But the springs of our national inspiration are not dried up. Young and old will drink from them and will take their work up anew with a courage born of an ardent imagination.

Men to-day are beginning to realize as never before that the realm of art is boundless. They are picturing to themselves marvellous new fields for music. They know that the persistent work of eager musicians has already made its

influence felt throughout the world. But music, while doubtless the oldest of the arts, is perhaps also the youngest. Because of its inexhaustible resources, it has before it the richest future. And men, intoxicated with the keenest hopes, are saying that if in future ages society will support, protect, and love the art and the artists which embellish life, deepen thought, and record the true history of humanity, all this fine development of music is but the beginning, the promise of a glorious future.

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