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The Origin of To-Day's Musical Idiom

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'Dorothy' in 1908, and he created the chief tenor part in Ethel Smyth's fine opera, 'The Wreckers,' when it was produced at His Majesty's Theatre in 1909. During the Beecham light opera season at this theatre in the same year he sang in Offenbach's charming 'Tales of Hoffmann' nearly forty times, and he appeared in Missa's 'Muguette' and D'Albert's 'Tiefland.' In the spring of this year (1911) he was the Siegfried in Herr Denhof's production of the 'Ring' in Leeds, Manchester and Glasgow. He is now on tour with the Quinlan Opera Company as principal tenor. He has already sung with great success in Puccini's 'The Girl of the Golden West,' and the repertory for which he is engaged includes 'Hoffmann,' 'Don José,' 'Tristan,' 'Lohengrin,' 'Tannhäuser,' and 'Radames.' The tour of this company will embrace many towns of the United Kingdom, and will extend to South Africa and Australia.

The foregoing life-story shows that John Coates's chief music school has been the public platform, and his principal professor has been himself. He is now in the prime of his powers. May he long continue to delight us with his art!

THE ORIGIN OF TO-DAY'S MUSICAL IDIOM.

By M.-D. CALVOCORESSI.

The very daring modern composers commonly called impressionists, in want of a more accurate term, have individually and collectively elicited more sarcasm and destructive criticism than any in history. This is known to be more or less the lot of all innovators; and not long ago M. Vincent d'Indy was able to show, by intermingling criticisms written in 1902 of 'Pelléas et Mélisande' with criticisms written in 1605 or thereabouts of Monteverdi's operas, that history repeats itself indeed. The same arguments and reproof (of obscurity, impurity of diction, cacophony, &c.) appeared in either case in almost the same words. In the hands of some art-judges, Beethoven has fared no better in his time than nowadays Debussy. But the detractory movement against musical impressionism seems to be unusually violent and general. In this very year 1911, after ample time for reflection has been available, one reads assertions like this, one which I select at random: 'In Debussy's "Pelléas et Mélisande," music plays so subordinate and insignificant a part . . . that the composer cannot be mentioned in the same breath with serious dramatists that wield the language of emotions through its gamut and have an infinitely varied palette . . .' It is also often alleged that all impressionist composers imitate Debussy. This second assumption, and the first in so far as it is not the mere statement of a taste—and as such unimpeachable until posterity shall have pronounced—I believe to be founded on a misunderstanding which can easily be made clear.

Some critics consider Debussy as the creator of an idiom, of a style, of methods entirely his own, which have sprung out of nothing and for which his whimsical fancy and his deliberate quest of

originality at any price stand alone responsible. If so, one might to a certain extent be justified in calling plagiarists all musicians who use similar idiom, style and methods, and even in judging his and their music, produced in defiance to all laws of evolution and tradition, to consist of mere monstrosities and to deserve but scorn.

Facts prove such a view to be absolutely inaccurate. There is no denying, of course, that so many neologisms and infringements of so-called 'rules' have seldom if ever appeared at once. But it has been the critics' and the public's misfortune that most of the forerunners of modern 'impressionism' should have until now attracted little notice, and that the works of Debussy and of the artists whose tendencies are similar should have taken everybody unawares. Such being the case, one could hardly expect bewilderment not to follow. But assuredly, had not almost all artistic facts that lead up to the expansion of to-day been overlooked, the public and the critics, who after all do nothing but follow the creative artist's lead sooner or later, although *haud passibus aequis*, would have borne the shock better.

It is self-evident that an artistic style cannot be devised as are a conventional language like Esperanto or a system of industrial labour. Its birth is slow, gradual. It arises when its time comes, from tendencies and attempts often distant, scattered, and sometimes casual. Even if the preliminary symptoms are not known, one can but surmise that they exist. Therefore, it is astonishing that one should have assumed this fundamental law to be reversed in the case under notice, and that none should have tried systematically to trace back to its origin and thence to follow in its development to-day's most striking movements.

Whoever undertakes this task will have to take into account first the spirit of 'impressionist' art, then its methods, then its characteristics of form, structure, rhythms and idiom (tonalities, modalities, chords and their combinations, melodic inflections, &c., with the resulting colour-effects). To show the return that may be expected from such a study it will suffice briefly to examine the last point.

The melodic and harmonic particularities—one should never separate the two—whose association distinguishes modern idiom, with its extension of tonal feeling and of harmonic superposition, may be traced back, if one sets aside folk-music, whose influence on to-day's art is considerable, as far as Chopin.

Several of Chopin's works, like the Barcarolle and the Etude, Op. 10, No. 3, will in that respect amply repay study. I shall quote here but one bar from the Etude, in which appear the typical ninth and undulating movement:

No. 1.

Franz Liszt's works afford even more characteristic and far more numerous examples. For instance, in 'Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este' ('Années de Pèlerinage,' third volume) almost every bar will be found to deserve attentive consideration for its boldness in tone- and colour-effects akin to the boldest dared by a Debussy or a Ravel.

But three composers, the first Russian and the two others French, should be named and studied before all others: Moussorgsky (1839-81), Chabrier (1841-94), and M. Erik Satie.

One can easily understand that the last-named should be little known: among contemporary musicians he appears as a freelance, and a very eccentric one, whose musical and other freaks may well disturb the seriously minded critic's composure or make him fear a hoax. Moreover, his music for the most part either has remained unpublished, or has appeared in scattered and fragmentary wise. But there is no such reason as regards Chabrier, whose often beautiful works deserve popularity in spite of some defects, and Moussorgsky, who is one of the world's greatest musicians and will eventually be acknowledged as such by all.

If Moussorgsky is little known abroad, it is because his artistic ideal and his methods were so novel, so disconcerting, his indifference to 'rules' was so profound, that the only people who came into contact with his works, the Russians, either were appalled or remained blind. So that no pains were taken to propagate his music, which was not brought under the foreign music-lover's notice until the recent time when a reaction has begun to make amends.

This very freedom of thought and style is now what we understand to be admirable in Moussorgsky's works. The composer, who always strove to attain simple and straightforward truth of expression through forcible colours as well as through subtle shades, has created an idiom astonishingly rich and flexible, including an abundance of novel chords and inflections out of which springs practically the whole language of modern impressionism.

For instance, this line from his opera 'Boris Godounov' (1874)* would certainly be attributed to the days of 'Debussyism' by anyone not knowing its origin:

And so would this one, from his cycle of 'Songs without sunlight':

* Quoted from the original, unrevised edition, now unfortunately out of print. All others, 'emendated' by Rimsky-Korsakov, are untrustworthy.

A score and more of such examples could be quoted. Not only these soft 'atonal' harmonies, but also the harsher whole-tone scales and aggregates, much used by Debussy and other contemporaries, appear in several parts of 'Boris Godounov': †

No. 4b.

As a further specimen of these gently undulating melodies for which the ultra-modern school shows a special fondness, after the instances from Chopin and from 'Without sunlight,' this one, from Moussorgsky's song-cycle 'The Nursery' (1870), may be given for its remarkably extended tonal scheme:

In a word, Moussorgsky—the first of modern composers to have mastered modern freedom of idiom—stands in very close relation with to-day's most advanced school. But other Russians, like Borodine, should not be neglected. Is not this motive from Borodine's 'Prince Igor' (1876-87):

most strikingly like a motive from 'Pelléas and Mélisande' in design and in substance?

The study of Chabrier's music—which affords a curious mixture of commonplaces, even vulgarities, and of exquisite refinements, and whose influence on Debussy has been great, on Ravel still greater—will lead to no less instructive comparisons. It

† As Mr. Clutsam in his excellent article on the subject (*Musical Times*, November, December, 1910) remarks, the free use of the whole-tone scale begins in Russia; not with Moussorgsky, but with Glinka, whose opera 'Rousslan and Ludmila' (1842) affords remarkable examples (quoted in the present writer's biography of Glinka). The first Russian to follow Glinka was Dargomyjski ('The Stone Guest,' 1869).

will be enough to give here one instance, from the score of 'Le Roi Malgré lui (1887):

No. 7.

As for M. Erik Satie, his case, although entirely different, is no less conclusive. He is, it is true, Debussy's junior by four years, being born (at Honfleur) in May, 1866. But as early as 1887 he had written some Sarabands for pianoforte, and shortly after (I believe in 1888) pieces termed by him 'Gymnopédies'—sketchy, undeveloped and formless, but in which almost all the idiosyncrasies of mature 'impressionism's' vocabulary and syntax are forestalled in the most curious way. M. Satie has been a pupil of the Paris Conservatoire, but has discarded all he learned there. When he writes he is guided by the ear alone, not by the eye nor by the intellect. His principle in composition is very rudimentary, since he attempts no sort of organization, of working-out, never follows an idea, and does not seem to possess the composer's higher endowments: but it is the principle that becomes the actual 'impressionist' school's starting point. M. Satie has brought forth—apparently from nowhere, but guided by his ear and fancy—a wealth of raw material of a hitherto unsuspected sort: unset, uncut gems, but beautiful enough not to be mistaken for worthless pebbles; novel harmonies, elusive outlines, strange effects, which occur not accidentally as in works of earlier composers, not even frequently as in Moussorgsky's, but continually and to the exclusion of anything else. His music may be termed almost protoplasmic, but nevertheless must be acknowledged as instinct with a new vital principle which asserts itself fully in the works of more complete artists and better craftsmen.

I have remarked that M. Satie's inventions have sprung out apparently from nowhere, and one might say almost as much of several of Moussorgsky's. This, however, does not mean that we have succeeded only in shifting back the confronted problem: symptoms enough of the gradual transformation and enrichment of musical idiom appear even before Moussorgsky's or M. Satie's birth. And these in turn—Chopin's or Liszt's for instance—can be traced back to their origin, so as to show the unbroken chain of evolution.

To point to such analogies is not to disparage any creative artist of to-day. A Debussy's connection with his forerunners is neither greater nor lesser than is any creative artist's: 'The predecessors of an original Genius of a high order,' says Wordsworth, 'will have smoothed the way for all that he has in common with them;—and much he will have in common; but for what is peculiarly his own, he will be called upon to clear and often to shape his own road.'

In fact, the foregoing remarks have no bearing whatever to the artistic value of Debussy's music or any other—music must always be judged

intrinsically. But it is hoped that they may help to make clear one not unimportant point, and to show that the birth of the 'impressionist' school in France, as elsewhere, is like all facts in the history of art a fact of evolution; if younger artists use methods similar to Debussy's, it is no sufficient reason to brand them as his imitators. Imitators there undoubtedly are, and many: but necessary distinctions have not yet been made. When the novelty of methods will have worn out a little, and the new idiom cease to monopolize attention unduly (a common case of the forest not being seen for the trees) and appear in its true light, as a mere vehicle, then it will become far easier to acknowledge the true individuality of certain artists whom one may be for the present inclined to judge, perhaps, a little rashly.

FRANZ LISZT.

OCTOBER 22, 1811—JULY 31, 1886.

By ERNEST NEWMAN.

(Concluded from page 711.)

VI.

As a matter of fact, it is not so much Liszt's sense of form that is generally at fault as his ability to fill the form he knows to be the right one. The 'Orpheus' and 'Mazeppa' are as logically developed and symmetrically balanced as one could wish; the form is the inevitable outcome of the ideas, and the ideas in themselves are admirably appropriate to the subject. If in certain other orchestral works he constructs clumsily here and there, it is not because the system of 'transformation' is *per se* a less worthy one than the system of 'development,'* but because Liszt himself had not mastered all the possibilities of the method,—as the pioneer could hardly have been expected to do. The new school saw at once that the old type of 'subject' would not do for the new ideas. Their themes necessarily had to be at once longer and more melodically free. Beethoven can evolve a whole world of tone of a particular order out of two or three notes, as in the first movements of the fifth and ninth Symphonies. Brahms's symphonic subjects, again, are often extremely short. In music, indeed, in which the weaving of the pattern is all-important, the smaller your threads the easier it is for you to weave; just as you can make a more varied mosaic out of small than out of large fragments of coloured stone. But you cannot describe a Faust or a Dante and their environment in terms so short and simple as the 'subject' of the ordinary symphony. Your symphonic-poem themes are as a rule much longer and more complex in their windings. This, it is evident, makes it more difficult to build with them. A theme like the first one of Brahms's second Symphony, or that of the opening of the Violin concerto—a simple unfolding of the tonic and the dominant chords—

* I would not agree that the antithesis between the two methods is anything like so sharp as the mere use of the terms in this form would imply. In 'Till Eulenspiegel,' for example, or in Elgar's Symphonies, development and transformation are always going on side by side. But this point need not be laboured now.