Stravinsky and Pure Music

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Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 63, No. 948 (Feb. 1, 1922), pp. 93-94

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/910967>

Accessed: 02-11-2015 10:51 UTC

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A night or two later he gave an exquisite performance of the Mozart Pianoforte Concerto in B flat—the same work that he played at the 'Saint-Saëns Jubilee Festival' which I had had the honour of organizing at Queen's Hall in June of the same year—and was recalled to the platform quite half-a-dozen times. The memory of that evening was the pleasantest reminiscence that he carried away from Gloucester. After all, applause is the very salt of the artist's existence.

Saint-Saëns was then seventy-eight, and still a wonderfully healthy, clear-headed man for his years. I found him looking remarkably well the following summer, when I assisted him to descend from the train at the busy station at Namur, in Belgium. I had gone there on purpose to meet him on my way to Switzerland with my wife and some friends. We had been spending the day at Dinant (poor Dinant!), and though none of us knew it, it was the actual eve of the Great War. As we drove together up the long hill leading to the Hôtel de la Citadelle (three weeks later a mass of blackened ruins) the *maitre* told me how he had just come from Brussels, where the King and Queen of the Belgians had promised him to arrive at Namur in time to hear him play at the 'joyeux festival' about to begin there.

Alas! the King and Queen were never to come; the Festival was never to be held; for next day the Belgian mobilization began. Yet, as we sat together after dinner in the palm garden of the doomed hotel, refusing to believe that if there were really to be war the Germans would dare to invade Belgium, I was to enjoy the most delightful chat (very nearly two hours of it) that I ever had with the venerable *maitre*. What marvellous form he was in! Too often inclined to be reticent in company, that night he unbent and held forth with eloquence upon every imaginable subject, musical and otherwise. His only offensive epithets were for '*ce chien de Kaiser*,' whom he declared to be a *charlatan et poseur* of the first order. He admitted that he was Chauvinist to the core, and had gradually grown to hate the Germans, though there had been a period in his life when he liked them immensely.

Then his thoughts reverted to Bayreuth, and he described with rare gusto and humour the ceremonial manners of the Wagner family—Frau Cosima in particular—on the occasion of a reception at Wahnfried. His imitations were most amusing; they ranged from personages to instruments, and he brought out some extraordinary varieties of tonal effect when producing *leitmotiven* from the *Nibelungen*. Yes, he still had great admiration for Wagner as an orchestrator, but could never forgive him for the outrageous burdens that he imposed upon the human voice; he could have avoided them had he pleased. Finally, speaking of the younger school of French composers, the venerable musician declared that he saw great talent and originality in the works of Debussy, and referred with affection to Gabriel Fauré, Vincent d'Indy, Alfred Bruneau, and

Gabriel Pierné. For the rest, he was only afraid lest eccentricity and extravagance should get the upper hand.

On the following morning Saint-Saëns left Namur for Aix-les-Bains, whilst I rather foolishly persisted in going on to Switzerland and Italy, with the result that I got back to England only with great difficulty three weeks after the outbreak of war. The last time I saw the dear *maitre* was at his apartment in the Rue de Courcelles in September, 1920. He was then growing rather feeble. Somehow I feel that I shall always miss him.

STRAVINSKY AND PURE MUSIC

BY BASIL MAINE

Suppose I am a painter. I paint, say, a portrait of a lady in *toilette de bal*, with her jewels. My portrait resembles the person painted. None the less, it is painted for the pleasure of painting, despite its subject. . . . The same thing applies to all my works. In *The Rite of Spring*, for instance, the pretext of the prehistoric birth of Spring has suggested to me the construction of the work that I have called *The Rite of Spring*. The 'pretext' I choose is but a pretext, like the painter's pretext for painting. . . . The 'Rite' exists as a piece of music first and last. . . .

And these words of Stravinsky as pretext have suggested to me various ideas which I find to be mostly differing from his own. The idea behind these statements is an old one, but it appears in a new and original guise. It is the old question of absolute and programme music over again, but it is presented in a new and striking way when music played as an accompaniment to a Ballet (or, as Stravinsky would have it, a Ballet danced as an accompaniment to a musical work) is classified as absolute music by its composer. If he would have us believe that *The Rite of Spring* is absolute music, why does he throw us entirely off the scent by performing it together with a Ballet, where we are naturally led to interpret the music in the light of what we see before our eyes as we hear it played? I must confess I felt a little injured when I read Stravinsky's words, especially as I had achieved some success (undoubtedly purely imaginary) in my small efforts at interpretation; in fact, I felt that the Ballet and the music were so wonderfully unified in spirit that I could not bear to think of them apart. (This, by the way, was exactly what I felt when I first saw and heard *L'Oiseau de Feu*.)

I cannot of that music rightly say
Whether I hear or touch or taste the tones.

And then to be told that this is pleasure obtained under false pretences, and that I must begin all over again! But, no! Let me try my weapons!

In the first place, we make a grave error when we attempt to divide all music into two such water-tight compartments as pure music and programme music: to the making of artificial groups and to the assigning of capital letters there is no end, and although we are persuaded that we are helping ourselves to think clearly by

such methods, they tend to become a tyranny and a snare and delusion. Even such a small composition as a song or an organ fugue cannot be definitely placed in either one or the other of these groups. A song would appear at first sight to belong quite clearly to the programme music class: the influence of the words on the music must necessarily outline a programme to be followed more or less rigidly, but the very fact that no two composers would set a given poem in the same way proves that, even in a song, music must retain a certain element of absolutism; that is to say, an element of absolute independence of outside influences, so that even if the music were divorced from the words, it would still give pleasure as music, although not such a satisfying pleasure. As an instance of this, I am reminded of a pianist of my acquaintance who can derive the utmost pleasure from playing the pianoforte parts of Roger Quilter's songs without the voice-part sounding at all; in fact, he went so far as to prefer them thus—as sound-pieces for the pianoforte! Again, it is quite true that an organ fugue must stand or fall on its merits as music, so that its absolutism would seem to be as undisputed as that of William the Conqueror. This seeming truth would be complete, but for a very disturbing element which can never be eliminated from the human mind—the law of association. The curious workings of this law will always prevent any such thing as exact definition, especially in matters of art. The human craving for a 'programme,' for something tangible and mentally picturesque, is seen on every hand: even in the most absolute forms of music the irreverent foot of man will intrude, confident and clumsy, so that we get such anomalies as *Moonlight Sonata*, 'Giant' Fugue, &c. The desire for 'knowing what it's all about' is as strongly inherent in the human blood as party feeling, and this desire is so persistent that often enough, rather than remain ignorant, human mentality will prefer a fabricated knowledge, which is a worse state of mind than the first. Rather than wait for the light, we like to construct our own little magic lanterns which nearly always distort our vision; and this is true not only of theology and history, but of the arts as well. Some critic more enlightened than the mere rank and file will tell us that the counterpoint in the 'Wachet auf' Organ Prelude represents the gay, heedless world. Who cares? It may represent that picture to him, while to another it may conjure up the restless strivings of the soul: association is necessarily subjective. But this is a little beside the point. The point is that even in the case of the most absolute music, human weakness cannot resist wild attempts at interpretation, so that it is clear that the law of association upsets all our calculations about absolute music. Strictly speaking there is no such thing: the most definite thing that can be said is that some music is more absolute and some is less. The truth is that in all music the elements of absolutism and association are present together;

moreover it is just as impossible to compose absolute music without being disturbed by subtle associations as it is to hear it, so that whatever Stravinsky may say about *The Rite of Spring* existing 'as a piece of music first and last,' we can be quite certain that there were ideas—however subconscious—which called the music into living form, and if those ideas are different from the actual ballet, then it is Stravinsky's duty to point out the differences to the choreographer, so that there can be some degree of unity in the performance.

As it is, the audience is put in a very unfair position: after having interpreted the music in the light of what happens on the stage during the performance, it is told by no less a person than the composer himself that its interpretation is quite wrong—that the ballet is a mere 'pretext'—that the music's the thing—and that the only way to arrive at the composer's real intentions is to ring down the curtain and listen with oriental abstraction. Why then take us to the theatre to hear *The Rite of Spring*?

But we know that the audience is right and that Stravinsky is wrong: *The Rite of Spring* does not exist as 'a piece of music, first and last'; it will admit of as many interpretations as there are people to hear it.

THERE AND HERE: A RETROSPECT AND COMPARISONS

BY M.-D. CALVOCORESSI

To revert to music after a complete intermission of about seven years must be in any circumstances a curious experience. And to revert to it in surroundings different from those in which one had previously worked, missing many things which had become a matter of course, and encountering many which one had not been accustomed to take into account, makes the experience doubly strange and instructive.

Looking backwards at the close of the year 1921, I wonder whether I have derived from it all the benefit that was to be expected. I feel that consideration of the numerous and important points of comparison which it has provided ought to yield something useful and stimulating not to myself alone: and that, were it possible to disengage the teachings of the facts brought to notice, the result ought to be one from which as much might be learnt—though, of course, in a different direction—as from Mr. Rorke's welcome and delightful little book, *A Musical Pilgrim's Progress*. The method would be very much the same. It would consist, in Mr. Rorke's own words, in 'describing sincerely from the beginning one's successive impressions and adventures, and discussing, not in the abstract, but on the basis of an actual individual experience,' the differences noticed, their causes and their consequences.

Better, perhaps—because more independent of any personal bias or method of thought—simply to describe things as they struck me, and try to