

M. Igor Stravinsky's Opera: 'The Nightingale'

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considered a reprehensible statement to make, serious art, at the moment, is in the melting-pot. No one can establish its aims, claims, significance, or forebodings with the smallest degree of certainty. The giant in whom all the wonderful developments of the past few years will be assimilated, in whose musical crucible the hundred and one brilliant experiments of the brilliant, but not epoch-making, composers who have been occupying attention in the last decades will come to a perfect alloy, is scarcely yet to be discovered. There are not even premonitory signs of his appearance. All the same he is coming, and in awaiting his advent our young composers could not be more profitably employed than in catering artistically for the large public that only requires its music as an entertainment, and as a study in taste and possibilities the work is full of a delightful interest. Not only that, but by judicious and well-considered steps the public taste can easily be elevated. In fact, it is, unconsciously may be, awaiting and expectant for that desideratum. And only the most completely equipped of our composers are capable of consummating the idea. The indifferent ones have been contributing their say in the matter in their hundreds, nay, in veritable little armies, ant-like stumbling over each other and other things in their race for some beautifully undefined goal, with a few of them actually getting there. This refers of course to all sorts and conditions of popular music. Once our composer who is now only seriously concerned with the creation of symphonic-poems and other offshoots of classical ideas turns his attention in the direction suggested, a wonderful change will come over the spirit of average music. The worst that can happen is that there will be no bad music, and the world is so full of it at the moment that another name altogether should be found for the commodity. Infinitely better and more moral is a good waltz than a bad or indifferent symphonic-poem. It is also infinitely more profitable than the greatest of symphonies!

M. IGOR STRAVINSKY'S OPERA :
'THE NIGHTINGALE.'

By M.-D. CALVOCORESSI.

M. Igor Stravinsky began to write the lyric play 'The Nightingale' in 1910, the very year when his name was for the first time signalled through the production at Paris of his ballet, 'The Bird of Fire.' After completing the first Act, he suddenly gave up the undertaking, feeling himself, as he explained to the present writer, thoroughly disinclined to deal with the form of the lyric play.

'I can write,' he said, 'music to words, viz., songs; or music to action, viz., ballets. But the co-operation of music, words, and action is a thing that daily becomes more inadmissible to my mind. And even should I finish my "Nightingale," I do not think that I shall ever attempt to write another work of that kind.'

Last year M. Stravinsky, we are told, expressed the same opinion to a representative of a London daily in the terse formula: 'Music can be married to gesture or to words—not to both without bigamy.' Nevertheless, immediately after having written 'Petrushka' and 'The crowning of Spring,' he reverted to 'The Nightingale,' which is now finished, and will be produced this month at Paris and in London. The briefest inspection of the new work is enough to make one realise how regrettable it would be did so gifted a composer abide by his decision not to write lyric plays. M. Stravinsky indeed is among all musicians of to-day one of the best endowed for dramatic music, and one of the few who may be expected to promote the genre of the lyric-drama. This the scores of 'Petrushka' and of 'The crowning of Spring' had already shown; and that of 'The Nightingale' is even more convincing, and in more respects. It shows not only the same admirable musicianship, daring, originality, power of suggestion, and absolute command of technique, but a new order of special qualities more specially conducive to excellence in the particular matter of dramatic music.

According to the modern conception of the lyric-drama, the chief quality of dramatic music is terseness—a quality most uncommon in all kinds of music, and which many will, not altogether wrongly, think almost incompatible with the very essence of musical art. The principle of music as generally understood appears to be amplification, repetition. At all events, the art of music has always consisted chiefly in that of working-out. And it is but of late that a number of music-makers and of music-expounders have raised an outcry against prolixity and redundancy in music: an outcry, it must be added, that for the present does not find much echo among the majority of art judges nor of the public.

The first of great musicians to abjure the principle of formal elaborate working-out in dramatic music and in lyric was Moussorgsky. A striking peculiarity of his best songs and of his masterpiece, 'Boris Godounov,' is the absolute lack, not only of anything resembling tautology or amplification *per se*, but of all that is not absolutely essential to direct expression (including many devices which no other musician of the time would have dreamt of leaving out), even if the omission be in defiance to all current laws of formal construction and balance.

For instance, the song 'The Orphan' ends, very dramatically, on the suspensive harmony of the dominant. 'Death's Lullaby,' which depicts a dialogue between a horror-stricken mother and Death, who comes to take away a child, ends abruptly on the burden of Death's last utterance, with which the composer's purpose is fulfilled. He never gives a thought to the practice of bringing back the main key which would have led him either to an inappropriate modulation, or to a superfluous addition. Similarly, 'Boris Godounov,' in the authentic version, ends, without even a cadence, on a chord that hardly leaves the impression of the tonic. And throughout the score, except

for the very brief preludes, a Polonaise, and a march heralding the entrance of the usurper, the orchestra is hardly heard alone even for a few bars, transitions and intervals between utterances or even Scenes being reduced to the strictest minimum.

The same principle obtains, to a degree, in M. Debussy's 'Pelléas et Mélisande.' But it is only at a later date that we can notice its intrusion in instrumental music—for instance, it has undoubtedly inspired M. Arnold Schönberg in the design of his famous Five orchestral pieces, or of the Pianoforte pieces, Op. 19.

My intention is not to pit the two principles against one another. Indeed, I think that beyond a certain limit, concision is incompatible with the very spirit of instrumental music. On the other hand it is a highly desirable virtue as far as dramatic music is concerned. But, were we all to agree upon that point, and to acknowledge that, judging by the actually prevailing tendencies, dramatic music will become more and more concise, it would hardly have the effect of making us find 'Tristan' or 'Die Meistersinger' less enjoyable and less admirable.

But the fact is that a new factor has appeared of late in the domain of dramatic music, which is now entering a new path; and consequently, a new order of artistic pleasure may be the outcome of this stage of evolution. The first consequence, of course, is a greater differentiation between the style of dramatic music and the style of instrumental music: unquestionably a progress, since it widens the range of methods and gives greater freedom to the composer's imagination.

Before attempting to show that 'The Nightingale' affords a most striking instance of brevity, 'the soul of wit,' as well in its last Act, which is altogether earnest and pathetic, as in its first two, which are chiefly picturesque and humorous, one should not omit to call attention to the fact that it is one of the very few extant lyric plays in which love plays absolutely no part. The peculiarity in itself is most unusual; and it acquires even a greater significance when one remembers that apart from the tragi-comic infatuation of Petrushka for his fellow-doll, the Dancing-girl, and from one beautiful song, 'Spring in the cloister,' which is the lament of a maiden deploring the absence of her lover, love has never been selected as a theme for inspiration by M. Igor Stravinsky, who in all likelihood would fully endorse all that Mr. G. Bernard Shaw, at the beginning of his Preface to 'Three plays for Puritans,' writes concerning the obnoxiousness and triviality of the ceaseless intrusions of that one passion as a foundation for all plots and developments.

'The Nightingale' consists of three short Acts. Music and action proceed evenly and rapidly. All the symbolic purport, all the undercurrents of suggestions contained in the text are never explicitly alluded to except in the brief recondite utterances of a minor character, a Fisherman who at the beginning and at the end of the Acts appears in the background to prophesy and to explain, foretelling the delight that will be caused

by the bird's sweet songs, 'the gifts of the heavenly Spirit,' the distress that will follow its departure, and its final victory over death. Those brief passages are the only ones in which, to quote Schumann's epigraph to the last of the 'Kinderszenen,' the poet speaks—'der Dichter spricht.' All the rest is kaleidoscopic, ceaseless movement.

The plot follows Andersen's well-known tale closely. In the first Act, after the opening song of the Fisherman, the Nightingale* appears and sings. Led by a Kitchen-maid who knows the bird's favourite haunts, the Chamberlain, the Chief Bonze, and a body of dignitaries come to inform the Nightingale that the Emperor of China wishes to hear it sing. The bird complies, and allows itself to be carried to the Palace.

The second Act begins with a picturesque *hors d'œuvre*: all the servants of the Court are adorning the gardens with lanterns, torches, and silver bells. They talk of the famous Nightingale. The Emperor appears and the feast begins. The Nightingale sings, and fills all hearts with wonder and rapture. At the very moment when the Emperor, moved to tears, expresses his heartfelt admiration, appear messengers from the Emperor of Japan, who bring as an offering a clockwork nightingale perched on a musical box. The artificial bird is forthwith set into motion. After listening to its play, the Emperor wishes again to hear the real Nightingale. But the bird has vanished. The Emperor, in high dudgeon, sentences it to perpetual banishment and orders the gift of the Emperor of Japan to be carried to the Palace and given a place of honour in his bedroom.

The curtain rising on the third Act reveals the Emperor in his bed, dangerously ill. Death is at his bedside, ready to pounce upon him, and has already taken hold of his sword, his sceptre, and his crown. He is tormented by the memories of all his doings, by the dreamy chant of ghosts that swarm around him. He gasps in remorse and agony, he murmurs, 'Music might dispel these horrors.'

And suddenly the voice of the Nightingale, responding to the appeal, makes itself heard, 'Here I am!' and the bird sets to the task of driving away Death. It sings, describing the beautiful garden of the dead, its restful charm and sweet calm, its unbroken silence. Death listens, and so potent is the appeal of the song, so deeply is the grim Death enraptured, that he is seized with a longing to return to his own realm, relinquishes crown, sceptre and sword, and retires. The grateful Emperor thanks the Nightingale, and beseeches it not to depart again. 'Rest in peace,' replies the bird. 'Every evening I shall come to thee, and I shall sing and whisper unto thy heart.'

All is quiet; the courtiers appear and imagine the Emperor to be dead. The pages reverently draw the bed curtains, and a dead march is played. But suddenly the Emperor pops out his head, and all ends in joy.

* The part of the Nightingale is sung from the orchestra; so is that of the Fisherman.

The greater part of the diverting episodes introduced by Andersen in the tale are included in the dramatic version. For instance, in the first Act the courtiers, on their quest for the Nightingale, mistake for its song, firstly, the lowing of a cow, and then the croaking of frogs. At Court, after the Nightingale has sung, all the ladies fill their mouths with water, and throwing back their heads proceed to gurgle in imitation of the bird's trills. But in all such cases, M. Stravinsky contents himself with the barest touches, and in obedience to his steady policy of conciseness and speed passes lightly, without dwelling one instant upon the amusing effects which in the mind of more composers than one would have been sufficient excuse for more or less protracted digressions.

Even in the third Act, whose atmosphere is altogether emotional, and in which occur many of the topics upon which music can most appropriately dwell, there is not one instance of prolixity nor even of amplification. The score *semper ad eventum festinat*.

This attitude towards his text M. Stravinsky justifies by curious reasons: 'I want neither to suggest situations or emotions,' he says, 'but simply to manifest, to express them. I think there is in what are called "impressionist" methods a certain amount of hypocrisy, or at least a tendency towards vagueness and ambiguity. That I shun above all things. And that perhaps is the reason why my methods differ as much from those of the impressionists as they differ from academic conventional methods. Though I often find it extremely hard to do so, I always aim at straightforward expression in its simplest form. I have no use for working-out in dramatic nor in lyric music. The one essential thing is to feel and to convey one's feelings.'

This despotic attitude—the sole point upon which a comparison between the spirit of Dr. Richard Strauss's art and that of M. Stravinsky might be founded, but in which it is far more natural to acknowledge the faithful counterpart of Moussorgsky's creed: 'Plain truth, however unpalatable, and nothing more. No half measures. Ornamentation is a superfluity'—has served M. Stravinsky's ends well, and led him to write a score of which the least that can be said is that it is remarkably pithy and spirited. Its style, in a measure, is what acquaintance with 'The crowning of Spring' or with the recently published 'Japanese songs' leads us to expect. But the music of 'The Nightingale,' naturally enough, is far less brutal than that of 'The crowning of Spring,' since the action takes us not to the barbaric age of prehistoric Russia, but to the highly formal and polished civilisation of a Chinese court. Apart from that, however, there is much in it (and especially in the last two Acts) that strikes one as hardly less daring than anything formerly dared by M. Stravinsky. Indeed, whatever might have resembled conventional treatment would have been quite incompatible with the very principle by which the composer was guided. Only the most forcible suggestions could serve his purpose

adequately, enabling him to convey his message as briefly as possible without loss of vigour and of point. And such an order of suggestions could hardly be achieved without an abundance of bold strokes. But for all that, the effect of the music is one of mellowness and dainty refinement, many unexpected things being toned down by the general perspicuity of treatment.

Despite this delicacy of the texture, M. Stravinsky makes use of a full orchestra, comprising wood-winds by threes with a piccolo, clarinet, bass clarinet, and double bassoon; three trombones and tuba; two cornets, besides the usual two trumpets; two harps, two glockenspiels, a célesta and a piano-forte; and the whole of the usual percussion, to which are added small antique cymbals.

Occasional Notes.

One of the chief events of the 1915 season will be the visit of the famous MENDELSSOHN Mendelssohn Choir of Toronto to this country and the Continent in CHOIR IN ENGLAND. May. A large sum of money has been raised at Toronto to finance the undertaking. The Choir will consist of 220 (200 with 20 in reserve) members. They will leave Toronto on April 20, and after giving concerts at Montreal and Boston will leave the latter city in a steamer specially chartered, and will arrive in London on May 1. The first concert in England will be given at Queen's Hall, May 4, under the patronage of His Majesty King George, and with the co-operation of the Queen's Hall Orchestra. Then Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Leeds, and Birmingham will be visited, and on May 12 and 13 two more concerts will be given at Queen's Hall, London. After that the Choir will go to Amsterdam, Berlin, Frankfort, Wiesbaden (probably), and to Paris, arriving there about May 24, and they will leave Havre for Canada a day or two afterwards.

This is a great enterprise which deserves every possible encouragement. The Choir and their able conductor Dr. Vogt will, we can safely say, be received with the sincerest cordiality by the choral organizations of Great Britain as well as by the general public. The répertoire of the Choir is a fine one. It includes most of the great modern oratorios, as well as many smaller works, accompanied and unaccompanied. The title adopted by the Choir does not mean that its object is to exploit Mendelssohn's works; in fact, these works are often conspicuous by their absence from the programmes. Canadian and United States critics agree as to the outstanding merit of the Society's performances. It may be well to add that the visit is not undertaken by the promoters in any spirit of vanity. With perfectly legitimate pride, they simply desire to show the Mother Country that in a great Dominion centre the traditional choral instincts of our race are finding artistic vent, and they look forward eagerly to fraternising with British choralists and musical folk generally.

A picturesque way of removing A PIANOFORTE surplus stock has been adopted by POGROM. Messrs. Allan, pianoforte dealers, of Melbourne. Recently fifty-one obsolete pianofortes were borne through the streets to the strains of 'Auld Lang Syne,' heaped in a pile, soaked in kerosene, and—cremated!