

STRAVINSKY'S APOLOGIA

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THERE has always been something peculiarly challenging about Stravinsky's utterances on music. His Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, just published by Harvard University under the title *Poétique Musicale*, are a



Sketch by B. F. Dolbin

vigorous and brilliant, but not a perfectly balanced statement of a neo-classicist's position in music today. Warning that his tone will be dogmatic, he says in the first lecture: "Je sais bien que les mots *dogme*, *dogmatique*, ne manquent jamais . . de heurter – de choquer – certains esprits plus riches de sincérité que fort de certitude." But dogmas are necessary for the clarification of values: "Si nous voulons jouir pleinement des conquêtes de l'audace, nous devons exiger qu'elle règne dans une lumière sans ombre." Though he is sometimes led by his dogmatic attitude into speculative extremes, it goes without saying that he is never pedantic. Nor does he try to systematize music. He makes no exclusive

claims for his own methods of composition, even conceding that Schönberg, though working along entirely different lines from himself, is indubitably a composer who knows exactly what he is doing and aims at deceiving no one.

Generally speaking, however, he is at his dogmatic best when treating of fundamentally human values, ethical and spiritual, rather than of music itself. Of our own day he remarks: "Ces temps ont fait place à un nouvel âge qui veut tout uniformiser dans l'ordre de la matière, cependant qu'il

tend a briser tout universalisme dans l'ordre de l'esprit au bénéfice d'un individualisme anarchique." Here, and elsewhere, he follows the lines of Jacques Maritain's thought, without, however, adopting Maritain's Scholastic terminology. For example, whereas Maritain upholds the "infallibility" of Art (not that of the artist who, as a man, may act against the interests of Art), Stravinsky expresses the same idea, substituting the word *instinct*. "L'instinct est infallible. S'il se trompe, c'est qu'il n'est plus l'instinct." To him, as to Maritain, the artist is the *homer faber* of the Middle Ages, the artisan before all else, rather than the exalted dreamer and superman that he became in the Renaissance and has more or less remained ever since. Explaining his use of the word *poétique* in the title of his course, he wants it understood in its original Greek sense, deriving from the Greek verb meaning *to make*. There are further elucidations of foggy words and concepts that make straight thinking on this elusive subject so difficult. "*Inspiration, art, artiste, autant de mots . . . fumeux qui nous empêche de voir clair dans un domaine où tout est équilibre et calcul . . .*" About the hateful word "modernism" he remarks trenchantly: "De soi, le terme modernisme n'implique ni louange ni blâme . . . On dit bien qu'il faut vivre avec son temps. Le conseil est superflu: le moyen de faire autrement?"

These two aspects of the book, that of re-asserting fundamental values which the world of today all but ignores, and that of debunking our current vocabulary, constitute its chief value – at least as polemics, and polemics are its author's avowed main purpose. Where he attacks purely musical heresies, he is inclined to overstatement, made not for the sake of effect, but rather, one suspects, for that of exorcising the miasmic demon of Romanticism as fully as possible from his own mind. Thus, because what the Romantics chiefly sought in music was expression, and were too often ready to sacrifice musical autonomy for it, Stravinsky avers that *all* expression is to a greater or less degree unmusical. Music, to be wholly autonomous, should express *nothing* but itself. When it tries to express meanings, as for example by too closely subserving a text, it lapses into pathology and becomes a mere "parti de remplissage." According to this view, composers ought, both in fairness to themselves and their audiences, to choose gibberish for their texts. This would not only safeguard them against any latent sinful tendency toward seeking to make their music express something; it would also save the listener the bother of making an artificial separation in his mind between the meaningfulness of the text and the meaninglessness of the music. We should also perhaps encourage singers

to have bad diction, instead of regarding this as a fault. Stravinsky allows, I believe, some musical value to syllables clearly enunciated. But he would surely concede that the loss in syllabic clarity caused by bad diction is more than compensated for by the blessed obscurity into which it plunges the meanings of the words, thus freeing the mind for that purified attention which music's absolutely hermetic autonomy demands.

It must of course be remembered that Stravinsky belongs to the generation of painters who aimed at "purifying" painting of all representation. There was a corresponding movement in literature, summed up in Archibald MacLeish's line, "A poem should not mean but be." These movements (aside from the masterpieces they produced) were valuable chiefly as correctives against over-representational painting, over-realistic literature, and over-expressive music. Today it would seem that most artists take a more moderate view: poetry should be *and* mean, painting should be *and* represent, music should be *and* express. In every case *being* should be prior, but we no longer consider that *being* sacrifices anything essential to its purity merely because it stoops to having some connection with the surrounding world.

A further example of overstatement made for the purpose of rectifying a contrary fallacy is his theory of time. This he presents in the form developed by his friend Souvtchinsky. The theory states that there are two kinds of time, the one ontological (time as it exists in itself, that is constant and measurable) and the other subjective (time as it is experienced subjectively, and that varies with moods of boredom, anticipation, etc.). Subjective time is for *expressive* music. Ontological time is for music that aims at what Stravinsky calls "*le calme dynamique*," and that subsists through unity rather than contrast. There is much that is admirable in this. Yet it seems to me to involve an important oversight. It overlooks the fact that a piece of music, like an organism, expresses its nature by performing certain functions or acts. The composer tries to gauge with all possible accuracy the time required for each of these acts to be successfully accomplished. But his chief concern is that they get done, rather than the precise number of split seconds required for it. If I am in the habit of going upstairs at a certain pace, I don't *fail* to get upstairs if my pace occasionally varies. But on the contrary, if I keep my eye glued to a stop-watch to make sure that I am preserving my habitual pace, I am liable to trip. This point could perhaps be illustrated more clearly by describing something that occurred two seasons ago in Washington when Stravinsky conducted a

program of his own works with the National Symphony. The novelty for Washingtonians was his *Jeux de Cartes*. Nadia Boulanger made it the subject of a lecture at the Philips Memorial Gallery in order to familiarize listeners with the work beforehand. One of the movements is in rapid $2/4$ time, and at one place there is a measure in $3/4$ time of which the last two beats are rests. Mlle. Boulanger explained that the extra beat of rest was to prepare for the strong down-beat of the next measure, to give it an extra *élan*. She then played the whole passage through and the need for the $3/4$ measure became, through her rendering, entirely clear. It suggested nothing so much as a dancer collecting himself before a leap. When Stravinsky conducted the work, this image was not suggested. It became merely a measure in $3/4$ time inserted into a $2/4$ rhythm. Whereas Mlle. Boulanger had, as it were, made the leap with faultless grace, Stravinsky missed it, because he was apparently thinking less about collecting himself and more about the exact amount of time allotted him in which to do so. In other words, the successful leap was negotiated because the time *necessary* was taken to prepare for it. It might, for all one knew, have taken a fraction of a second more or less than what the rests in the $3/4$ measure allowed, but it was accurately gauged with respect to the act to be accomplished.

Ultimately, what Souvtchinsky's theory implies, is that the time element in music is as absolute as pitch. Music is such tenuous stuff, one would gladly subscribe to this notion, providing as it does one more constant and strictly measurable element with which to work amid a welter of imponderables. Yet if it were true, there would be no radical difference between playing a Bach Fugue with a *rallentando* at the end and playing it on a piano whose pitch could somehow be controlled so that towards the end of the piece one might start sliding down into a lower key. The *rallentando* might be in bad taste, but it would not involve such utter collapse as the other.

I have indicated that Stravinsky's most acceptable dogmas are those relating to broad human values. One exception must be noted and then I shall have done snapping at the great man's heels.

It is difficult, in the practical field, to separate the three Transcendentals, Truth, Beauty and Goodness. To say that one cares nothing for Truth or Goodness and only for Beauty amounts to admitting one is a monster. Artists of the Romantic era sometimes posed as creatures of this sort. Stravinsky evidently has these long since defunct antagonists in mind; for though his own opposing view is to be inferred rather than imputed to

him on the basis of any explicit declaration, it nevertheless seems to be the unmistakable trend of his thought to regard only Truth and Goodness as objective and to relegate Beauty to the sphere of purely subjective criteria. Thus, he appeals to the position taken by medieval Catholic philosophers whose definitions applied mainly to the True and the Good. Once we know what to believe and how to act we are pretty well fitted for life according to God's plan. But if this plan did not call for exact commands about what we are to *admire* and *enjoy*, if man has been given no divine prescription for attaining to the possession of the Beautiful, medieval philosophers were not for this reason inclined to question the equality of its status with that of the other transcendental attributes of Being. St. Thomas Aquinas defined Beauty as *splendor formae*, the splendor of form – an object of delectation perceived by the mind through the medium of the senses. Maritain attempts to distinguish the act whereby we *know* a truth from the act whereby we perceive the beauty of an object. Of the latter he says: "Cette joie n'est pas la joie de l'acte même de connaître, joie de savoir, joie de vraie. C'est une joie qui déborde de cet acte, quand l'objet sur quel il porte a une proportion excellente à l'intelligence." This overflow, or outgoing of the spirit toward the object that is loved for its beauty, is perhaps falsely associated in Stravinsky's mind with his old bugaboo, emotion. For he has a firm belief in the essentially spiritual qualities of the mind and will, and a corresponding mistrust of emotions valued for their own sake. In the confused, pseudo-scientific philosophy that prevails in so many quarters today, the word emotion is too often used to cover whatever cannot be explained in purely materialistic terms.

I feel that I have hardly done justice to a book that is throughout stimulating, vigorous and fresh, and often wise, in its almost boyish outspokenness. My favorite part is the lecture in which he describes his own creative processes, and the paragraphs he devotes to the value of the unexpected, the accidental, are too brilliant not to quote:

"La faculté de créer ne nous est jamais donnée toute seule. Elle va toujours de pair avec le don d'observation. Et le véritable créateur se reconnaît à ce qu'il trouve toujours autour de lui, dans les choses les plus communes et les plus humbles, des éléments dignes de remarque. . . Il n'a pas besoin de courir à la recherche de la découverte: elle est toujours à portée de sa main. Il lui suffira de jeter un regard autour de lui. Ce qui est connu, ce qui est partout le sollicite. Le moindre accident le retient et conduit son opération. Si son doigt glisse, il le remarquera; à l'occasion,

il tirera profit de l'imprévu qui lui révèle une défaillance.

"On ne crée pas l'accident: on le remarque pour s'en inspirer. C'est la seule chose, peut-être, qui nous inspire. Un compositeur prélude comme un animal fouille. L'un et l'autre fouillent parce qu'ils cèdent au besoin de chercher. A quoi répond cette investigation chez le compositeur? A la règle qu'il porte sur soi comme un pénitent? Non: il est en quête de son plaisir. . . .

"Nous fouillons donc dans l'attente de notre plaisir, guidés par notre flair et soudain nous nous heurtons à un obstacle inconnu. Nous en éprouvons une secousse, un choc et ce choc féconde notre puissance créatrice."

Life without pleasure would be unendurable; and to what higher aim can an artist aspire than that of providing his fellowman with pleasure in its highest form? Yet many people are inclined to think that the "seriousness" of a work of art is in some way proportional to the agony that attends its creation. No doubt Stravinsky goes through hell when he is composing, but that is none of our business. We are grateful for his reticence, imparting as it does an exquisite secrecy to what is undoubtedly as sane and joyous an account of the genesis of the creative process as we have ever been vouchsafed by anyone with a right to speak of it.