

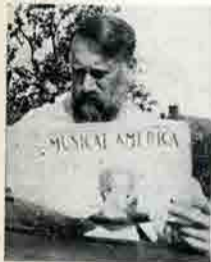
IGOR STRAVINSKY: CONTRAPUNTAL TITAN

Described as "Bach of To-day" by English Writer—Plays New Works for Group of Intimates—Musical Opinion Rallies to "Sacre du Printemps," Revived in Paris—Score Will Be Recognized as Greatest Achievement of Decade, Is Prediction—Contrapuntal Evolution More Pronounced—Use of Instrumental Timbres—Color Polyphony in Painting

By EDWIN EVANS

LONDON, Jan. 20, 1921.

ABOUT three weeks ago I spent a day with Stravinsky at the villa he is occupying a little way out of Paris. With us were Ernest Ansermet, the conductor, Derain, the painter, and one or two other kindred spirits, and naturally we heard some of the composer's latest works. He played us the piano version of the Concertino which, somewhere about the same date, or a little earlier, was being hissed in New York. We also heard the opening section of "La Noce Villageoise," the whole of "Renard," and his last completed composition, "Symphonies d'instruments à vent à la memoire de Claude Debussy." Within a few days previously I had also heard two performances of "Le Sacre du Printemps," the revival of which was the occasion of my visit to Paris. I had also assisted at a concert given by the group of composers known as "Les Six," and enjoyed a quiet hour's conversation with Maurice Ravel, who not long before had paid an interesting visit to Vienna, and was full of musical news from that city, where the lamp of modern music is now burning as brightly as in Paris and London. Before leaving London I had read E. J. Dent's impressions of musical Berlin, which he found some decades behind the times, so far as contemporary musical thought is concerned, and on my return I read of the greeting that had rewarded those admirable players, the Flonzaley Quartet, at the first performance of the Concertino. On the mental impression made by these contrasts, I make no comment. The mere statement of their succession is enough.



Edwin Evans

Paris's Changing Attitude

The attitude of Paris toward the "Sacre du Printemps" has developed exactly as one would have forecasted from historical precedent. It will be remembered that in 1913 the work was received in the same way as New York received the Concertino. The following season it was performed by Pierre Monteux at his "Concerts Populaires." He had, of course, the advantage of a more specialized audience. Among those who went to the Ballet there must have been many for whom music was a necessary but not very important adjunct to the stage performance, and when they found that the unfamiliar sounds encroached so much upon their attention they were predisposed to resent it. Others came to see and be seen by the best Paris society. Those who went afterwards to the concert performances must be presumed to have been attracted by the music, or at least by curiosity concerning it. These performances were very successful, and the effect of them upon the public has persisted. When the ballet audience gathered again to hear the same work in December, its predisposition was the other way, and the music was heard with the right kind of attention. Except at one point of the performance, all opposition had vanished, and as the music at this particular point is relatively unaggressive, whereas Massine's choreography is somewhat provocative, I do not think I am wrong in assigning to the latter the audible signs of disapproval, which were not very pronounced, and such as they were, were quickly silenced. That

is the position after seven years. Seven years hence, I am convinced, this work will be generally recognized as the greatest musical achievement of the decade which produced it. Year by year musical opinion is rallying to it. Only the other day a Paris musician, whose attainments entitle him to be heard, declared that it towered over the music of its period in the same manner as the "Matthew" Passion and the Ninth Symphony towered over theirs.

Thinks in Counterpoint

Meanwhile Stravinsky has not been at a standstill. The tendency towards a contrapuntal evolution which was visible in "Petroushka" and even before, has become more pronounced. He is less and less preoccupied with chords, and more and more engrossed in the movement of parts. Of course his conception of counterpoint is not that of the sixteenth century, nor is it limited to the resources of the scale. His employment of instrumental timbres is essentially contrapuntal. When, for instance, he associates for a brief moment in "Pulcinella" the double-bass and the trombone, it is not that he wants to mix these two sounds into a blended timbre, which would correspond with harmonic method. He takes a soft and fatty penetrable sound, and sets against it a hard penetrating one, and if they are of unequal intensity, they possess in another way equal strength, for both are extremely characteristic, and character is strength. But their respective characters differ so widely that their identities



Igor Stravinsky, Famous Russian Composer, Whose Latest Work Reveals His Development as Magician in Counterpoint

are in no danger of being sacrificed. They exist as independently of each other as any two parts in a piece of counterpoint. Stravinsky treats rhythm the same way. But it is a little premature to analyze processes of this kind, and it has moreover the special disadvantage of conveying an impression that the composer is working to a theory, which is not the case. That is one of the dangers besetting any writer like myself in the endeavor to clear up some of the intricacies of modern music. If I analyze a Brahms symphony it will not occur to anybody that the technical reasons I give were Brahms's reason for writing it. If I do the same with a Stravinsky work there will always be some malignant person who will say that Stravinsky wrote it to prove the theories advanced in explanation of it.

This contrapuntal tendency is by no means limited to Stravinsky. It permeates the work of nearly all the composers who have the distinction of meeting with the disapproval of reactionary audiences. It is not even limited to music. It animates modern painting. You will meet with it in the theater. As an instance I would quote a setting which Lovat Fraser, who designed that of the "Beggars' Opera," has recently made for a little ballet which Mme. Karsavina is presenting at the Coliseum. Its colors stand out sharply, one from another, and do not sacrifice a fraction of their identity. They form a counterpoint to each

other where artists of the other tendency would have sought to make harmonies. And the advantages gained by this process are the same. In a scene designed for harmony the individual patches of color offer the eye an uncertain outline. Between a costume and the background in front of which its wearer is moving, one receives the optical impression of a narrow zone of neutral blur, which results from the tendency of harmonized colors to fuse one into the other. But the free employment of opposites, that is to say, the opposition of complementaries, has, if the artist has sufficient skill and taste, the effect of a colored polyphony in which the parts move with as much freedom as in musical counterpoint.

I have a special purpose in mentioning these things at the moment. I recently committed myself to the statement that Stravinsky was identifying himself more and more as a successor to Bach, that he was in fact becoming the Bach of to-day, and it came to my knowledge afterwards that this was regarded as one of the things which a journalist will say because he thinks they sound clever. I do not think that I am given to saying things with that view, but if I am, I take the opportunity of asserting that this is not one of them. In impulse and incentive there is quite a remarkable affinity between Bach and Stravinsky, and I feel that it will become more apparent as time goes on.

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