

THE MUSIC OF FRANCE

A Glance At Five Leading Composers

MUSIC in France has always been an aristocratic art, and there has been little development of folk song. The distance between this still aristocratic art and popular music is in fact greater in France than in any other country with which it could be compared. Largely for that reason French music has always been characterised by lightness and daintiness. The Frenchman is not satisfied with what he says, unless he says it in the best possible manner, and French musicians have always followed the same rule. It will perhaps reveal the variety and richness of the field if we glance briefly at five leading composers.

LULLY

Jean Baptiste Lully (who was born in Italy but taken to Paris as a boy of thirteen) is generally regarded as the pioneer of French opera. But with all his talent Lully reached his exceptional position largely by intrigue, by a mixture of buffoonery and flattery, which gained him the protection of the king. Though the general opinion of him as a man is extremely low, one of his biographers says that he "had a good heart . . . was neither deceitful nor spiteful, was without arrogance, and would meet the least of musicians on terms of equality, but was of blunter speech and less gracious manner than is usual with a man who has lived a long time at court."

Whatever the facts of his life were, the manner of his death was certainly extraordinary. He struck himself violently on the foot with the stick he used for beating time, a small abscess formed on the little toe, and the wound for want of better attention became gangrenous, and killed him (on March 22, 1687, at fifty-four years of age).

RAMEAU

Another strange and little known figure was Jean Phillippe Rameau, who loved solitude as much as



JEAN BAPTISTE LULLY
His little toe killed him

Lully loved the limelight. Despite all the honours and privileges that were heaped upon him during the latter part of his life, he lived by himself. To those who did not know him he was unattractive—neither inviting to look at (someone compared him

to an organ-pipe, with flutes for legs) nor amiable in conversation. As he composed he sang in a harsh voice, sitting at his shabby old clavichord, gesticulating to himself, lost in his music. "All his mind and all his soul were in his clavichord, and when he closed that the house was empty, there was no one at home."

His only interest outside his music was mathematics, a fact which perhaps explains his innovations in the matter of harmony and orchestration—innovations which started all the Philistines howling, but which to-day seem inevitable.

In spite of his eccentricities he was on the point of being raised to noble rank in 1764 when he died of typhoid fever. He was accorded magnificent funeral honours.

COUPERIN

Francois Couperin ("le Grand") lived in a time when Paris was filled with men and women who have made history, and he had the luck to have two kings for patrons. Moliere, La Fontaine, and Racine were still living when he was young, while Voltaire and Rousseau were launched on their careers before he died.



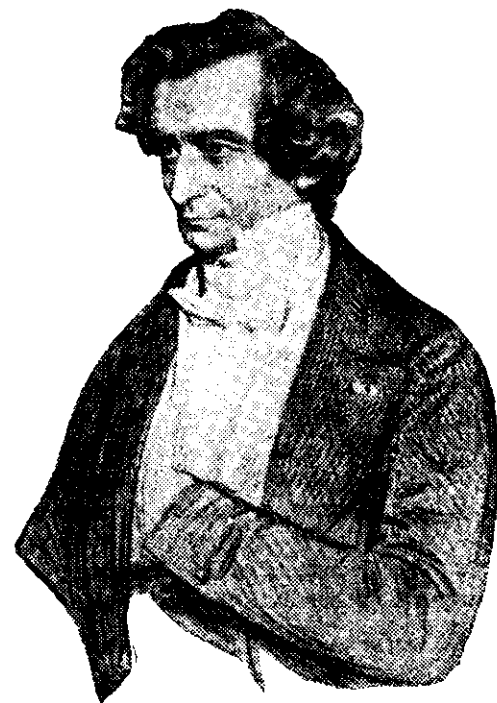
Bizet's overture, "La Patrie," will be included, at 2.3 p.m., in the special programme dedicated to France, which 2YA will broadcast throughout the day on Sunday, March 31

He was one of three sons of Charles Couperin, and father and sons were all at one time or another organists of the church of St. Gervais in Paris. "They succeeded one another at the organ," someone has said, "as the Bourbons did on the throne of France!"

Couperin is considered by many to have been one of the finest composers for the organ and harpsichord that the French nation has produced. He was the fashionable teacher in Paris, and put great emphasis on perfection of playing. He also wrote a "Method," instructing lady pupils how to sit gracefully at the clavier, and not grimace. "Watch the company," "Smile a little also!" were among his directions.

BERLIOZ

Berlioz, who still holds a foremost place among the great masters of the orchestra, was a pioneer in his field, and as pioneers are apt to do, came



HECTOR BERLIOZ
The artist flatters him

into conflict with his contemporaries. But he was not exactly a master of tact. His ideas were hurled at his colleagues with something of the same violence and extravagance which can be heard in his music. But we must not forget, though he has been dubbed "The Wild Man of Music," that his music can be really beautiful, and sometimes truly impressive. On the other hand, his volcanic love story would make an excellent theme for Hollywood.

In appearance Berlioz was very fair, and carried "a large umbrella of hair, projecting like a movable awning over the beak of a bird of prey." He had a deep voice, but his speech was halting, and often tremulous with emotion; he would speak passionately of what interested him, and then be effusive in manner, but more often he was ungracious and reserved. He was of medium height, and had a passion for walking and climbing, and the vagabond life. He had an iron constitution, but he was soured by stupid opposition, and lived unhappily.

DEBUSSY

Claude Debussy was super-refined, but lived in a coarse and hard world. At an early age, too, he was smitten by a malignant disease that was to prove fatal when he was only fifty-six and should have been at his prime. Nor was his country over-generous to her gifted son, since he was well on in his career before he received even £250 a year from rights attaching to his music. He had no taste for public life, and his cancer affected his nervous system and made him an eccentric. Sometimes he would compose in a kind of fury, walking rapidly from room to room, rhapsodising on the piano, humming, beating time, and writing with painful slowness. Then he would pass months in idleness—dreaming and taciturn. Yet he was the father of all modern music—the fertiliser and stimulator of two generations.