

The Sensibility of Maurice Ravel

THE recent revival of *Bolero* by the Marquis de Cuevas Ballet and the complete recording of *Daphnis and Chloe* which has recently appeared on the market, have turned the thoughts of Ravel's friends back once more to those sweet bygone days when the master composed those great works. It will soon be twenty years since he died, and it is hard to realise that such a barrier lies between us and him, for he has remained so sharply present in his music and in our memory. *Daphnis and Chloe*, a choreographic symphony in three parts and five themes, was staged by Michel Fokine in 1911. *The Bolero* dates from 1928, and is closer to us, more popular and more moving, too.

Ravel had been pondering over it two or three years at the time I had the rare good fortune of being introduced to him by one of his best friends. It was one evening when they were going to sup together at a small restaurant in Montmartre, where the creator of *Heure Espagnole*, a modest man who wanted to be left alone, was known under an assumed name.

The friend to whom I owe that marvellous experience was none other than

Léon-Paul Fargue, a militant in music, then in the fullness of his inspiration, and I can still hear him saying: "This *Bolero* is simply the perpetual movement hidden in music, its rightful place. All it needed was discovering. It was the Christopher Columbus egg of instrumentation. But someone had to think of it. The piece is unique of its kind today. It is a plunge too into the mysterious essence of monotony, an exploration of the merging undercurrents of universal rhythm, the baptism of sound, a force of nature in its primitive state . . ."

He would then take the composer by the arm, beckon to one or two friends whom he deemed worthy of the adventure and pilot us to a night club where just before closing time, when the jazz band had left, Ravel, impassive and smiling, would sit down to the piano and entrance us. Sometimes he would give form to his thoughts and record the moment of inspiration he was living—searching, starting again and suddenly finding what he wanted, as though he were alone at home; sometimes he would play passages from his *Sonatina*, a lively, beautiful piece, one of the masterpieces of piano music; or fragments from *Miroirs*, that captivating suite with its wings and pearls dropping into the dark

by ANDRE BEUCLER

clear water that you can actually feel around you in the end, and of which he was so fond.

That piece was already twenty years old at the time, and it brought to us evocations, echoes and souvenirs of forgotten enthusiasms. It did, of course, and yet it did not. Ravel, a pupil of Massenet and then of Fauré, is one of those who retain no trace of influences he might have shown and which he only brushed by just closely enough to take that infinitely small, infinitely precious something which had to be preserved.

What influences were these? They range from Erik Satie to the beginning of jazz, via the Russian Ballet, symbolism and cubism, music hall, modern style, naturalism, the 1900 vogues, languor, subconscious control . . . A man who is interested and sensitive cannot remain impervious to modes and manners. He even showed that he was not averse to the face of fashion provided he found elements of what he liked there. But he always retained his independence. Nothing ever actually took a hold of him. As one of his close friends

in those early days explained, what was new might at times modify the way he wrote but never what he wrote.

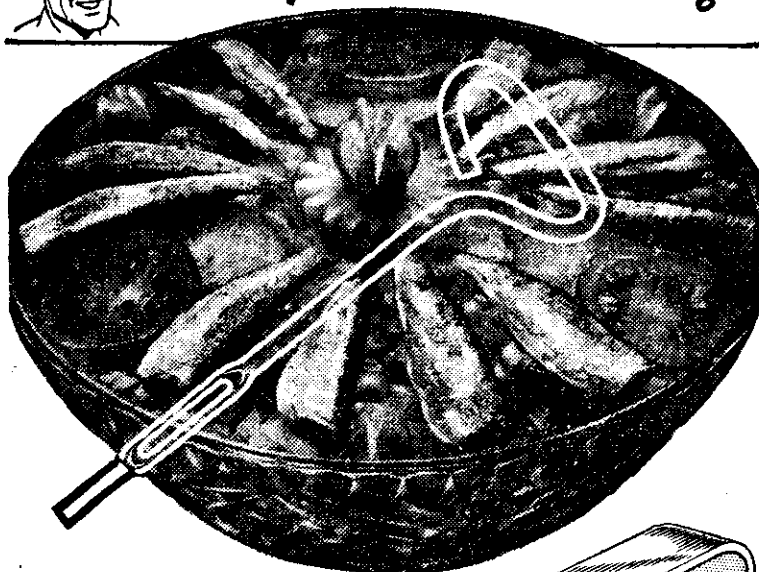
At that time of night, or rather morning, Ravel would suddenly stop playing, as though disturbed by some variance between the time, the place and his presence, or as if he wished to master his inspiration known one instant to him alone. But a kind of shyness, an expression of dissatisfaction almost, prevented him from resuming again forthwith. He would fold his arms and stay still on the stool. Naturally we could not possibly do other than respect that short spell of meditation. Then he would turn round, restless and concerned, making an effort to put on a pleasing and even humorous countenance, and he was never so true to himself, so to speak, as during those moments.

Ravel was built on the small side; he was sharp, tense and showed his breeding, but he was merry, saucy, too, and very naive when he wanted, suddenly stern, reticent, wily, thoughtful and reserved, then open again, hearty and gay. That unforgettable face of his, so straight and honest, was dimpled and yet bony. At times he seemed to be some haughty and distinguished lone figure already departed from this life; at others he was like a mischievous schoolboy who has just thought out the best prank of

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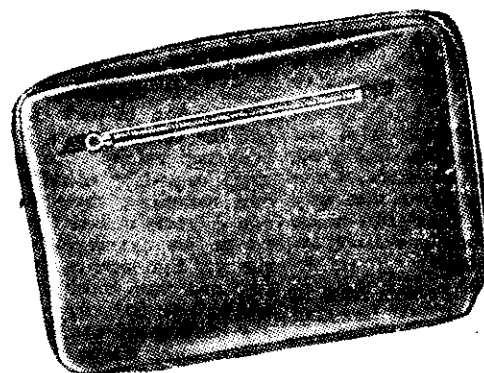


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