

Preface

1) It is always dangerous to speak of oneself. However, several persons have vigorously either criticized or praised me, and always wrongly and for things I had not done. On the other hand some students particularly eager for novelty have asked me numerous questions relative to my musical language, and I decided to write this little "theory." Aside from a few very rare exceptions pointed out in passing, all the examples quoted here will be drawn from my works (past or future!). In the hope that my students will return to the few ideas that I am going to develop — whether to use them better than I, or to draw something else from them, or to reject them ultimately if the future proves them unlikely to live — I draft my treatise by taking the reader's hand, searching with him, in the darkness where I have hoped guiding him gently toward a restrained light, preparatory to a better understanding which he will be able to find afterwards. If the reader is equipped with solid studies of harmony, counterpoint and fugue, composition, orchestration, as well as rhythmic and acoustics, he will follow me much more easily. If he is called by inspiration from above, and if I find myself to be — on a quite small point only — his precursor, my task will be fulfilled and beyond...

Melodies for voice and piano or voice and orchestra make up a good third of my production; they assume very varied forms (psalmody, vocalise, anthem, strophes, couplets and refrain, trio-form, bridge-form : ABCBA, development of dramatic order, tableau in several panels following the divisions of the poem) and often present, by their proportions and by their character, the aspect of abridged theatrical scenes. However, outside of a few words on psalmody and vocalise, I shall say nothing of my special ideas on theater, vocal forms, prosody, and the union of the musical line with the living inflections of speech.

Supposing the fugue and the sonata to be well-known to the reader, I shall pass over them rather rapidly and talk more at length of less usual forms, especially the plainchant forms.

Why this silence?

The Technique of My Musical Language, language considered from the triple point of view, rhythmic, melodic and harmonic. This work is not a treatise on composition.

I have discarded, also, all that could touch upon instrumentation. One can find in my works some very refined orchestration, large vocal and instrumental investigations, a pianistic writing, unexpected organ registrations, and even some effects of the Ondes Martenot (1). Let us forget all that and respect the chosen title; it is a question of language and not of timbre. Although I have written a good number of religious works — religious in a mystical, Christian, Catholic sense — I shall further leave aside this preference; we treat technique and

(1) *Translator's note.* — An electronic instrument. Martenot is the name of the inventor; *onde* is the French equivalent of *wave*.

not sentiment. I shall content myself, on this last point, with citing an article in which I formerly glorified sacred music. After having asked for " a true music, that is to say, spiritual, a music which may be an act of faith; a music which may touch upon all subjects without ceasing to touch upon God; an original music, in short, whose language may open a few doors, take down some yet distant stars, " I stated that " there is still a place, plainchant itself not having told all. " And I concluded : " To express with a lasting power our darkness struggling with the Holy Spirit, to raise upon the mountain the doors of our prison of flesh, to give to our century the spring water for which it thirsts, there shall have to be a great artist who will be both a great artisan and a great Christian. " Let us hasten by our prayers the coming of the liberator. And, beforehand, let us offer him two thoughts. First, that of Reverdy : " May he draw in the whole sky in one breath ! " And then that of Hello : " There is no one great except him to whom God speaks, and in the moment in which God speaks to him. "

2) I do not want to close this introduction without thanking : — my masters : Jean and Noël Gallon, who stimulated in me the feeling for the " true " harmony, Marcel Dupré, who oriented me toward counterpoint and form, Paul Dukas, who taught me to develop, to orchestrate, to study the history of the musical language in a spirit of humility and impartiality; — those who influenced me : my mother (the poetess Cécile Sauvage), my wife (Claire Delbos), Shakespeare, Claudel, Reverdy and Eluard, Hello and Dom Columba Marmion (shall I dare to speak of the *Holy Books* which contain the only *Truth?*), birds, Russian music, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, plainchant, Hindu rhythmic, the mountains of Dauphiné, and finally, all that evokes stained-glass window and rainbow; — my most devoted interpreters : Roger Désormière (orchestra conductor), Marcelle Bunlet (singer), Étienne Pasquier (violinist), Yvonne Loriod (pianist); — finally, all who induced me to write this work and particularly my friend André Jolivet.

CHAPTER I

The Charm of Impossibilities and the Relation of the Different Subject Matters

Knowing that music is a language, we shall seek at first to make melody "speak." The melody is the point of departure. May it remain sovereign! And whatever may be the complexities of our rhythms and our harmonies, they shall not draw it along in their wake, but, on the contrary, shall obey it as faithful servants; the harmony especially shall always remain the "true," which exists in a latent state in the melody, has always been the outcome of it. We shall not reject the old rules of harmony and of form; let us remember them constantly, whether to observe them, or to augment them, or to add to them some others still older (those of plainchant and Hindu rhythmic) or more recent (those suggested by Debussy and all contemporary music). One point will attract our attention at the outset: the *charm of impossibilities*. It is a glistening music we seek, giving to the aural sense voluptuously refined pleasures. At the same time, this music should be able to express some noble sentiments (and especially the most noble of all, the religious sentiments exalted by the theology and the truths of our Catholic faith). This charm, at once voluptuous and contemplative, resides particularly in certain mathematical impossibilities of the modal and rhythmic domains. Modes which cannot be transposed beyond a certain number of transpositions, because one always falls again into the same notes; rhythms which cannot be used in retrograde, because in such a case one finds the same order of values again — these are two striking impossibilities. We shall study them at the end of Chapter V ("Nonretrogradable Rhythms") and in Chapter XVI ("Modes of Limited Transpositions"). Immediately one notices the analogy of these two impossibilities and how they complement one another, the rhythms realizing in the horizontal direction (retrogradation) what the modes realize in the vertical direction (transposition). After this first relation, there is another between values added to rhythms and notes added to chords (Chapter III: "Rhythms with Added Values"; Chapter XIII: "Harmony, Debussy, Added Notes"). Finally, we superpose our rhythms (Chapter VI: "Polyrhythm and Rhythmic Pedals"); we also superpose our modes (Chapter XIX: "Polymodality").