

MUSIC HO!

A Study of Music in Decline

by

CONSTANT LAMBERT

With an introduction by
ARTHUR HUTCHINGS

OCTOBER HOUSE INC.
NEW YORK

1936/1967

Nationalism and the Modern Scene

Glinka as a Russian composer, not of Glinka as an individual composer—is echoed faithfully in every work which continues his tradition. There is an extraordinary lack of formal as opposed to merely colouristic progress in Russian progress, and during the seventy years that separate *Ruslan* from *Le Sacre du Printemps* there is less real advance, save of a purely decorative and two-dimensional order, than there is in the thirty years that separate Beethoven's first symphony from his ninth. On the debit side, then, is this one grave accusation. Russian music had the vitality to break up the eighteenth-century tradition, but not the vitality to build up another. Like nomad Tartars, the Russians razed the Western buildings to the ground but put up in their place only gaily painted tents.

(d) Nationalism and the Modern Scene

There is no other country, however, which has produced a purely national school for which we can say so much. The Spaniards can show no *Boris*, no *Prince Igor*, no *Coq d'Or*—nothing but a series of glorified and tasteful picture postcards of the come-to-sunny-Spain order. The grandeur of Spain's historical and artistic past, the austerities of its inhuman and inspiring landscape, are conquered by the monotonous *espèglerie* of the cabaret dancer. In Russian music the voice of a street singer is sometimes the voice of the people, but in Spanish music it remains the voice of the street singer—charming, alluring, nostalgic no doubt, but essentially limited both in its appeal and in its potentialities.

The whole of Spanish music so far is summed up in a few of Albeniz's piano pieces: notably *Evocación*, *Malaga*, *El Polo* and *Triana*. These, within their narrow range, have a unique charm and an unexpectly profound emotional

Nationalism and the Exotic

appeal; but they are exceptional examples of an unvarying formula which soon becomes wearisome in the extreme. Manuel de Falla, after continuing the Albeniz tradition in a somewhat desiccated manner, has only found an escape from this obvious cul-de-sac by grafting on to his national style a chilly neo-classicism. Most other modern Spanish composers seem unable to realize that they are in a cul-de-sac at all, and figures like Turina still rely on the picturesque glamour of the folk dance and the religious procession to disguise the essential thinness of their musical thought. With the inevitable and not-far-distant conquest of the jazz band, and the already established conquest of an anti-religious government, this glamour will suffer a severe setback even if it does not disappear altogether.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the Spanish national style was invented by a Russian, Glinka, and destroyed by an Englishman, Lord Berners; for after the latter's amazingly brilliant parody of Spanish mannerisms it is impossible to hear most Spanish music without a certain satiric feeling breaking through. The self-conscious concentration on purely local characteristics which is the hallmark of all Spanish composers without exception, the eternal stamping of heels and clacking of castanets, is at times as irritating and embarrassing as the self-conscious racial exhibitionism of those who unconvincingly remark: 'Wouldn't I be telling you that it's Irish I am', or those who suddenly break into a 'black-bottom' to cries of 'Vo-dodeo-vo' and 'Whoop-e-e' in a vain effort to persuade others and themselves that they are instinct with the overbrimming vitality of the New World.

This irritating sense of artificiality is doubled by the time we get to the modern English school of nationalist composers. To the technical disadvantages inherent in the use of folk song as musical material, that we have already examined,

Nationalism and the Modern Scene

is added the depressing fact that English folk songs have for the average twentieth-century Englishman none of the evocative significance that the folk songs of Russian had for the average nineteenth-century Russian. The Petrograd coachmen would have been found singing tunes of the type that occur quite naturally in *Boris*, but the London bus conductor is not to be found singing the type of tune that occurs in *Hugh the Drover*; if he sings at all he is probably singing a snatch of *Love is the Sweetest Thing*, in an unconvincing though sickening imitation of the American accent.

Folk songs in England are not a vigorous living tradition, as they were in Russia, nor have they the power to graft a foreign influence on to themselves while retaining their own individuality, like the Catalan sardanas which have added to their primitive basis sophisticated and foreign elements without losing their essentially Catalonian qualities. The English folk song, except to a few crusted old farmhands in those rare districts which have escaped mechanization, is nothing more than a very pretty period piece with the same innocent charm as the paintings of George Morland. The particular type of self-conscious Englishry practised by the folk-song composers is in itself curiously un-English. England has never produced an artist so 'echt-English' as Mussorgsky is 'echt-Russian', or Renoir 'echt-French'. The strength of the English tradition in art is that it has always been open to fruitful foreign influences, which have been grafted on to the native plant without causing it to wither away. The Elizabethans, and Purcell after them, drew what they could from their Italian contemporaries without in any way submerging their own personalities. Even in our day Elgar and Delius have, in their widely different ways, written music that is essentially English in feeling without having to dress itself up in rustic clothes or adopt pseudo-archaic modes of speech.

Nationalism and the Exotic

Although at the time it started the English folk-song movement probably provided an excellent pied-à-terre for those who not unnaturally wished to rid English music of the intolerable accretion of German clichés that had been strangling its growth for a hundred years or so, it is by now—if it was not always so—a definitely exotic and ‘arty’ movement completely detached from any genuine life. That English folk songs are indeed an exotic growth to even those composers who exploit them is suggested by the way in which they mingle homely English with barbaric Irish songs. In Borodin the Russian and Tartar tunes are always kept severely apart, the latter being recognized as a definitely exotic element opposed to the natural expression of the former. The English composers have invented a species of synthetic Anglo-Irish melodic line which conjures up the weakest passages in Housman and Yeats at one and the same time.

There is about this music something both unbearably precious and unbearably hearty. Its preciousness recalls the admirably meant endeavours of William Morris and his followers to combat the products of those dark satanic mills with green and unpleasant handwoven materials, while its heartiness conjures up the hideous faux bonhomie of the hiker, noisily wading his way through the petrol pumps of Metroland, singing obsolete sea chanties with the aid of the Week-End Book, imbibing chemically flavoured synthetic beer under the impression that he is tossing off a tankard of ‘jolly good ale and old’ in the best Chester-Belloc manner, and astounding the local garage proprietor by slapping him on the back and offering him a pint of ‘four ’alf’.

It may seem unreasonable to condemn a school of composers for what some people might consider extraneous social reasons; but it is essential that we should see music against its social background. The recent invention by certain critics

Nationalism and the Modern Scene

of a hitherto unknown art described as ‘pure music’ has resulted in the criticism of music becoming more and more detached from any form of life, composers being treated as though they produced patterns of notes in a spiritual vacuum, uninfluenced by the landscape, social life, and political situations surrounding them. For every technical argument for or against a method of composing, there is at least one social argument, and the social argument is often the more far reaching and convincing.

At the present time the arguments against deliberate nationalism in music are twofold. The first point is a minor technical one, but it is yet worth establishing. Modern harmony has progressed to such a point that the application of it to a modal folk song is as absurd as an atonal setting of *Land of Hope and Glory*. The harmonic style of Glinka and Borodin, like the harmony of the sixteenth century but unlike the harmony of the eighteenth century, provides a natural counterpart to the modal line of the folk song, the reason being that it is based roughly on the harmonic implications of the melody itself. Though the harmony may give an unexpected twist to the melody, the two exist in a state of amity up to the end of the century. But with *Le Sacre du Printemps* we begin to get folk tunes treated in an harmonic style that has not the remotest emotional or technical relation to the harmonies suggested by the melody itself. The relation between the melodic line and its harmonic setting is no longer friendly. It resembles more that between the unfortunate yokel in the dock and the cynical barrister prosecuting him.

The lack of rapport between the tune and harmony is particularly noticeable in some of the later works of Bartók. Although in his earlier works, such as the first two string quartets and the opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, Bartók achieves a melodic line which, like that of Vaughan Williams at his

Nationalism and the Exotic

best, is intensely individual while yet drawing its inflections from national song—a line which is at one with its stark harmonic background—in his later works, such as the piano sonata, a dangerous split is apparent between melody and harmony, the melody becoming definitely simpler, squarer and more ‘folky’ while the harmonic treatment becomes more cerebral and outré. The gap between the two becomes such that in some passages, notably the finale of the piano sonata, the composer gives up all attempt to bridge it, merely punctuating each pause in an innocent folk song with a resounding, brutal and discordant crash, an effect which, did it not remind one of a sadistic schoolmaster chastising some wretched country bumpkin, would verge on the ludicrous. This is an extreme example, perhaps, but it is obvious that the less consonant harmony becomes, the more artificial is the effect provided by the introduction of folk-type material.

There is a far more profound argument, however, against the deliberate fostering of a national style at the present day, and that is the lack of any genuine spiritual or social background to lend force to such a movement.

We have only to think of the average large street in twelve different European capitals, streets distinguished from each other only by the names painted over the shops or the way the windows open, filled with men in precisely the same drab clothes following precisely the same drab occupations, supporting wives or mistresses wearing the same cheap French models and using the same cheap French perfume, going to the same Garbo film, listening to the same American light music, watching the same kind of sports and driving the same kind of motor-car, to realize the absurdity of conjuring up one street by a can-can, another by a hopak, a third by a tango, a fourth by a morris dance and so forth through the stock list of national dances. Specific and

Nationalism and the Modern Scene

stylized national forms, such as the folk dance with its characteristic rhythm, are now become symbols as artificial as the various types of hat—the flat top hat of the sturdy Rowlandson John Bull, the tall top hat of the dyspeptic goatee’d Uncle Sam, the astrakhan hat of the bearded Bolshevik, the Phrygian cap of the matronly tricoteuse—by which political cartoonists try to disguise the fact that we are all represented by much the same type of tired and harassed business man wearing a characterless and standardized bowler.

It is true, of course, that you don’t destroy a nation by destroying certain national customs, that the fact that the delegates at Geneva look alike does not prevent their disliking each other, that England is England still, the spirit of Drake, etc.—any journalist can be asked to fill in the rest of this paragraph. . . .

Music however, being the most instinctive of the arts is more than any other art susceptible to the purely mechanical differences of civilization in so far as they affect our emotional life. The argument that England is England still is an intellectual one to which the musical nerves refuse to listen. If the composer imagines that he can treat present-day Surrey with its charabancs, filling stations, hikers, road houses, dainty tea rooms, and loud speakers discouraging cosmopolitan jazz, in the way the Elizabethan composers treated the ‘woodes so wilde’ he is living in a narrow world of escape, incapable of producing anything more than a pretty period piece.

A composer cannot, without performing a spiritual amputation, entirely detach himself from his times. One does not require that his work should be a strictly contemporary record, but one does require that it should not be a series of studio pictures.

Boris Godunoff, though dealing with an earlier period than

Nationalism and the Exotic

Mussorgsky's own, was in no way a period piece, for the Russian people and its relations to the Czar and his government were still much the same in Mussorgsky's day as they had been for centuries past. The spiritual foundation of *Boris Godunoff* was the spiritual foundation of Mussorgsky's Russia, and that is why every scene has such extraordinary realistic force quite apart from its purely musical value. But the spiritual background of a modern people's-opera, like Vaughan Williams's *Hugh the Drover*, is something that no longer exists and which nothing will bring back and the work in consequence fails to move us except in a detached nostalgic way.

Tristan, again, though laid in legendary Cornwall is no more a period piece than *Boris*, for the setting is not an integral part of the opera but a frame to the expression of Wagner's feelings about himself and about love in general. There is no possibility of a modern *Tristan* either, because this particular type of romantic feeling has crumbled away just as much as the national feeling of Mussorgsky's time. There was nothing forced about Wagner's and Liszt's romanticism. It was the most natural thing in the world for Liszt to take his young countesses on Lake Como and read them Tasso and Victor Hugo. If anyone still thinks this spirit exists let him visualize himself taking his young woman on the Serpentine and reading her T. S. Eliot. I don't want him to dismiss the argument as facetious or trivial, I just want him to spend a minute or two visualizing the scene. The various inhibitions, social and personal, which would prevent this scene taking place, or being in any way moving did it improbably take place, exactly explain why the modern composer cannot hope to write a movement like the Gretchen section in the *Faust* symphony.

If we go further back in history for a great opera that owes much of its greatness to its firm spiritual and social

Nationalism and the Modern Scene

background, we find that Mozart's operas are not a symbolic but an exact reproduction of the spirit and society of his day. He himself could have walked into one of his own operas, which combined the most delicate spiritual beauty with the social topicality of a play by Somerset Maugham. The essential falsity of modern attempts to revive the delicious formality of the Mozartian period of opera lies in the fact that the whole framework of society, whose relation to the individual symbolizes the cadences and codas that gently restrain the flow of Mozart's passionate line, is crumbling away if not already completely desiccated.

If we take *Figaro*, *Tristan*, and *Boris*, as representing three of the highest peaks in the history of music, we see that they symbolize three phases of human thought without which background they would have taken on a very different shape and quality. (The same is true of the instrumental works of these three periods, but the relation is more clearly grasped in a stage work.) Mozart represents the aristocratic internationalism of the eighteenth century, Wagner the passionate individualism of the romantic movement, Mussorgsky the equally passionate democratic nationalism of the nineteenth century—which has its basis in emotion not in economics. The people who, in effect, say to the modern composer: 'Why don't you stop making those beastly noises and write lovely tunes and pleasant harmonies like those in *Figaro*, *Tristan* and *Boris*, etc.?' may not realize that even were a modern composer sufficiently endowed with invention and technique he is totally lacking in the artistic faith, conscious or unconscious, that these phases of thought provided.

It is hardly worth while pointing out that the aristocratic internationalism of Mozart's time is gone, once and for all. As for the romanticism that inspired Liszt and Wagner, it may still beat in a few isolated breasts, but the latter-day

Nationalism and the Exotic

individualist must feel painfully *déraciné*—unless he happens to be a temporary dictator, in which case his twenty-four-hour day hardly leaves him time for composition. The decline of individualism has been so devastatingly exposed in Lewis's *The Art of Being Ruled* that there is no need for me to expatiate on it at length.

Manfred and Don Juan would not be allowed to walk about Europe alone today. They would have to buy a guitar, join a band of Wandervogel and put up at special hostels. Axel and Sara would neither renounce the world nor enjoy it—they would carefully invest their money, and spend it on the improvement of the Axel estate or the construction of an emancipated school on Bertrand Russell lines for the benefit of the villagers. Tristan would not have entered into his regrettable emotional entanglement, either because he had been carefully brought up to realize the folly of such anti-social behaviour, or because his experimental marriages with both Isolde and Brangäne had already been proved a failure—in any case he would be a teetotaller and would say: 'No, I am afraid I never touch potions in any form.'

The decline, not so much of romanticism but of the individualism and obstinacy without which it cannot exist, is aptly symbolized in the gradual transformation of the Rowlandson-like John Bull into the Little Man of Strube, the black-coated citizen at the beck and call of the Press barons, docile, smiling and obedient, capable only of mass indignation, herd pleasures and community singing.

Although most people would admit that the aristocratic internationalism of Mozart's time and the romantic individualism of Wager's were both, if not extinct, completely enfeebled in our own day, it might be thought that the nationalism that inspired *Boris* is more rampant now than ever. At first sight this may seem to be so but, just as there is more food than ever in the world and also more starvation,

Nationalism and the Modern Scene

just as there is more music than ever in the world and also less genuine musical experience, so at the present there is more petty nationalism than ever combined with a less genuine basis for national feeling. As this is not a political pamphlet and was indeed intended—as a glance at the title page will show—to be a book on music, I cannot enlarge on this aspect of present-day life even if I were competent to do so. No one, however, whatever his political opinions, can fail to distinguish between the liberal spirit of nationalism that inspired political figures like Mazzini and musical figures like Mussorgsky, and the retrograde spirit of nationalism that inspires the petty dictators and juntas of gangsters, with their pathological worship of violence and hatred of all true intelligence, even from their own nationals, that are becoming our leaders today. Does anyone imagine that the dictators of today and the tariff wars they engage in will inspire works like *Boris Godunoff* and *Prince Igor*? The gangster film or the comic strip would seem more suitable mediums in which to treat the self-appointed puppet leaders and would-be leaders of the people.

However much inspiration the composer may draw from the contemporary scene it is unlikely that he will draw any from the Press-fomented patriotism of the present political situation. More particularly as the recent increase in political separatism coincides with a period when, through the advance of mechanical communications, mechanical reproduction of music and wireless, the physical and psychological separatism is decreasing.

The physical texture, the uniform drabness of modern urban life is far more vividly presented by Hindemith and his followers than by any of the self-conscious nationalists. For not only does Hindemith produce busy and colourless music without any distinguishing spiritual or national quality, but his followers and pupils, whether they write in

Serbia or in Golders Green, produce precisely the same type of busy and colourless music. Their works differ as much from each other as a Cook's office in one town differs from a Cook's office in another. They represent the final decline of the aristocrat, the romantic and the peasant, of the three types of whose psychology the composer must in some degree partake. Here at last is the musical equivalent of the robot and the adding machine. Whatever its merits as psychological realism this is obviously, from the audience's point of view, the least desirable form for the reaction against excessive nationalism to take—it is like exchanging Burns's poems for Mr. Ogden's basic English. Moreover, its avoidance of essential psychological differences in national musical thought is as false as the insistence on superficial differences in national musical style.

Whatever we think of nationalism in music we cannot sweep aside the whole of music since Glinka. The only solution is an absorption of national feeling in an intellectually self-supporting form such as we find in the symphonies of Sibelius. While the peculiar atmosphere of Sibelius's music is no doubt as influenced by intense national feeling as anything in Bartók or Vaughan Williams, we are never conscious of his allowing local atmosphere to interfere with formal and expressive preoccupations. He is a citizen both of Finland and the world. His symphonies, in which incidentally nothing approaching a folk song appears, are not Finnish symphonies but symphonies by a Finn. He alone among modern composers has combined the national intensity of Mussorgsky's operas with the formal intensity of Beethoven's quartets; and listening to his works we realize that our whole quarrel is not so much with nationalism as with that particular form of provinciality that has degraded nationalism to the level of the exotic.

(e) The Cult of the Exotic

In literature the exotic and the nationalist keep rather severely apart. As far as I can remember Swinburne is the only poet to deal both with legendary oriental queens and Northumbrian fisher-lasses, and he took great care that they should not occur in the same poem. In music, however, the cult of the exotic and the cult of the peasant are curiously intermingled in the works of the same composer and, very often, the same composition. This may be due to the fact that the cult of the exotic was 'established', so to speak, by the same phenomenal genius who established nationalism—namely, Glinka. The fact that Glinka was a Russian strengthens the link, for in Russian folk tales, more than any others, do we get the familiar treatment of fabulous oriental czars side by side with homely Russian peasant heroes. At a later date the link between the two may signify, as I have suggested in the previous section, that nationalism itself has become something of an exotic culture.

The exotic elements in Glinka's music are of two kinds. First of all we get the exploitation of the exotic atmosphere suggested by the music of those countries nearest to his own, such as Persia and Caucasia. These have a certain authenticity of conception and feeling that marks them off completely from the usual oriental fantasies of western composers, so brilliantly pilloried by Kaikhosru Sorabji in his *Around Music*. It is natural that exoticism of a convincing kind should have its foundation in Russia, for Russia on the one hand, and Spain on the other, form the boundaries of Western music.

It is an interesting experiment to put on gramophone