

## MUSIC

## THE MUSIC OF "LES NOCES"

THE music which is most effective in the theatre is too often that which possesses least intrinsic significance. What, for example, could be more indubitably effective than the roll on the side-drum which habitually precedes a sensational acrobatic feat in the music-hall? Many of Strauss's most effective moments in "Salomé" and "Elektra" stand ultimately on no higher a musical level than that. The corollary is equally true, namely, that the greater the intrinsic worth of a composition the less likely it is to prove effective in the theatre. Both propositions apply just as much to the ballet as to the opera, for it is almost an axiom that the music which is best adapted to the purposes of dancers is generally the worst considered simply *quâ* music. The fact remains that if a work in either form is to survive permanently, the score, besides being dramatically or choreographically apposite, must also satisfy us purely on its own merits. For this reason it is infinitely more difficult for a composer to succeed completely in the theatre than in the concert-room, in spite of the fact that opera or ballet is probably, from a purely æsthetic point of view, inferior to what is called absolute music.

It can, I think, be admitted without hesitation that "Les Noces" of Stravinsky, which has been the most interesting of the new productions of the Russian ballet this season, is an exceedingly attractive spectacle, and, from the point of view of *ensemble*, is remarkably successful. On the other hand, one has even less hesitation in coming to the conclusion that Stravinsky's score, considered by itself, is pretty poor stuff. Indeed, in my opinion, this applies to practically all his work. However apt and appropriate it may be as a single element in the *ensemble*, it never, or very rarely, succeeds in holding our attention in the concert-room. For example, the symphonies for wind instruments and the more recent piano sonata are admitted even by his warmest admirers to be complete failures. It is quite possible, however, that if they had first been presented in conjunction with an elaborate *mise-en-scène* and all the exquisite artistry of the Russian dancers they would have been hailed as masterpieces. The same applies to a certain extent to "Les Noces." The music of Stravinsky's earlier ballets first became known to most of us in association with these other elements; this was the secret of their great and immediate success. The music of "Les Noces," on the contrary, had been published for some years before its presentation in ballet form, and there has consequently been ample time and opportunity for forming a fair estimate of its intrinsic qualities. One's conclusion is that, like nearly all Stravinsky's other work, it is little more than an effective musical *décor* which has no independent existence apart from the whole. Like the Russian precious stone called alexandrite, which is pale and almost colourless by day and a deep red by artificial light, the music of Stravinsky is empty and meaningless on paper and only comes to life in the artificial atmosphere and surroundings of the theatre.

It is, therefore, not only natural but entirely excusable that literary men and artists, who, it may be noted in passing, are generally the warmest and most convinced admirers of this composer, should be carried off their feet by such an art; they have no opportunity or capacity for judging it under more unfavourable conditions or in less advantageous surroundings than His Majesty's Theatre. The musician, however, when he goes to hear an opera or ballet, must comport himself like a scientific observer at a spiritualistic *séance*, and not let his attention be diverted or his senses deluded by the cunning wizardry of M. Diaghilev. It may be true, as Mr. H. G. Wells has said, that "Les Noces" sheds a new light on the mind of the peasant. It is even quite possible that Sir James Frazer might find in it the material for a new "Golden Bough," or that it might illuminate some of the more obscure problems dealt with by Dr. Westermarck in his monumental history of that quaint institution called human marriage. With these aspects of the case a mere musician is not competent to deal. But when Mr. Osbert Sitwell declares that

Stravinsky is the greatest composer of the last hundred years he feels that it is time to intervene. In the first place, the work reveals a complete lack of melodic invention. The thematic material consists entirely of monotonous little pentatonic wisps of tune which are never developed or combined, but only repeated. Now it may be true that a seeming triviality may assume significance through development, but certainly not through mere reiteration and re-statement. It is not an exaggeration to say that at least half the score could have been written out by means of the dash with a dot on either side which is the traditional musical equivalent of "&c." Secondly, the rhythmical poverty which must inevitably result from the necessity of co-relating the music with the movements and gestures of a number of dancers is too obvious and flagrant to need labouring. Indeed, this metronomic, machine-like inflexibility of rhythm is characteristic of all ballets without exception, of all concerted dance music whatsoever, and constitutes the fundamental objection to its claim to be considered as one of the higher forms of musical art. Lastly, there is not a trace in "Les Noces" of construction or organic continuity. Like practically all Russian art it is built up by means of an accumulation of small and insignificant details; like the Russian language, its syntax is illogical, undisciplined, incoherent; like Russian history it is made up of a sequence of unrelated episodes; like the Russian temperament it has neither stability nor centrality. It is, in fact, a typical product of the Russian mind, and, as such, is fundamentally irreconcilable with the traditional heritage of Western music. Ultimately, Stravinsky's art can only appeal to those who have no artistic roots in the past, and no cultural traditions, or to those who would escape from or destroy them.

CECIL GRAY.

## PLAYS AND PICTURES

"THE TWIN," the new production at the Everyman Theatre, is a heroic effort to appeal to certain phases of modern superstition. The effort, for all I know, may be successful. The play at any rate plunges almost unfathomable depths of imbecility. It consists of a long discussion between a family in various stages of psychic mania and their clerical relative, who considers all spiritualistic phenomena as a manifestation of a singularly superannuated devil. It is in fact difficult to decide which of the two parties to the dispute are the more credulous. There are one or two sensational moments, when spirits are vaguely adumbrated on the scene. Eventually, as can be imagined, the crazy parson drives his neurotic daughter on to complete catastrophe. All this pother may make up an agreeable play for those interested in the subject of spiritualism. Other persons might feel that if they had got to spend the evening listening to a discussion on spiritualism, the arguments employed might have been rather more scientific and up-to-date. Miss Valerie Taylor looked extremely attractive as a spooky flapper.

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Happily, however, the French can be just as silly as the English, witness "There's no Fool . . ." the latest production at the Globe Theatre, which has been adapted from the French of M. Pierre Wolff. Even more remarkable than the play, which deals with the Elderly Amourist, his charming son, and the lovely young lady (Miss Margaret Bannerman), is the astonishing nature of the translation, which creates the impression of intentional parody. In the first five minutes the hero says: "Ha! Voices," when he means, "Take care, somebody's coming," and we continue on the same note. There is a fine moment when the *jeune premier* remarks with a break in his voice: "You see I don't remember my mother," while the hand kissing is incessant. "There's no Fool" recalls in its exaggeration the French farce in "Voces Populi." The evening ends with an amusing little farce, "Our Dogs," based on a misunderstanding. A lady describes her dead dog to a slightly intoxicated gentleman, who thinks she is talking about her dead lover. The cross-purposes and double entendre that spring from this mistake are highly diverting. To hear