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SPECULATIVE MUSIC
(CYRIL SCOTT, DANE RUDHYAR)

Cyril Scott. — *La Musique.* Son influence secrète à travers les âges.


The appearance of Dane Rudhyar's book in French translation is a major event in the small world of Speculative Music. In reviewing it one naturally thinks, as a basis for comparison, of the book that has hitherto held the field, at least in the English-speaking countries, and I take the opportunity to consider them together.

There is an interesting resemblance between these two grand old men of esoteric music, who lived so long (Cyril Scott from 1879-1971, Dane Rudhyar 1895-1985) and even looked rather similar. Both knew early fame as composers in what was then heard as an extreme modernist style. Scott was one of the first English composers to become aware of Continental developments and to write in an Impressionistic idiom. So successful were his early works — mainly songs and salon pieces — that a book on his life and works was published before he was 40, and he passed as spokesman for a “modernism” based on Debussy, Scriabin, and (less prophetically) Percy Grainger. Rudhyar also had early success as a composer, coming from France (where he was born) to hear his orchestral music performed by Pierre Monteux in New York, and staying in the U.S.A. for the rest of his life. In 1917, at the age of 21, Rudhyar had published a book on Debussy's music, on which the composer himself is said to have looked with approval. But the difficulties of making a living from music soon forced Rudhyar into other fields. He has been a poet, novelist, painter, lecturer, and performer especially of Scriabin’s music.
(which his own somewhat resembles) but his major field and the subject of many of his 40 or so books is astrology, philosophical and psychological.

Both composers were Theosophists: Scott of the Besant-Leadbeater school, Rudhyar far more independent and free-thinking. After World War I, Scott also entered a new field with a series of enormously successful books on occultism, *The Initiate*, by his Pupil, *The Initiate in the Dark Cycle*, and others. These he at first published anonymously; they are still in print, and far better known than any of his musical work. His pleasant, impressionistic music sounded less and less modern as time went on, and his reputation as a self-styled occultist did nothing to help his standing in the eyes of music critics or the B.B.C. (British Broadcasting Corporation) which effectively banned his compositions from the air. By the end of his life he was sadly regarded as an eccentric who had long outlived his period. Yet he continued to compose, not for his own pleasure but, as he said, at the behest of his Master who was certain that a future age would again appreciate his music. One can see from Scott's autobiography *Bone of Contention* (New York, Arco, 1969) that he maintained his quick brain and his sense of humor through all of this, confident in the guidance he received from his Master. He was also able to see the positive side of socio-cultural developments in the 1960s, and the promise they held for a future more attuned to the kind of ideals he had always held.

Rudhyar, living in California, kept up with the times in a more direct way, becoming a major influence in the 1960s through his contribution to astrology. He had always stood for its deeper aspects, as opposed to the simple predictive and mundane ones, and now as interest in the science increased his works were among the most respectable and solidly based, as much on Jungian psychology as on Theosophy. Rudhyar had written a fine book on Indian music in his earlier years (*The Rebirth of Hindu Music*, Adyar, Theosophical Publishing House, 1928, reprinted New York, Weiser, 1979), but its admirers had despaired of his ever producing a sequel. The appearance of *The Magic of Tone and the Art of Music* as the mature fruit of his 86th year was the most gratifying surprise to them: now at last his career as a musical philosopher had reached its goal.

In both men one can see the effects of an early appreciation for Debussy and the mystic Scriabin, leading them on a musical path equally apart from those of the Germanic line (Mahler, Strauss, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern) and Neoclassicism (Stravinsky, Prokofieff, Hindemith). A period which so admired these types of music naturally passed them by. Both Scott and Rudhyar foresaw a future era of music free both from formalism and from unremitting dissonance, and it may be that of the many paths taken by 20th century music those of Debussy and Scriabin (to which one could logically add Messiaen) may prove more fruitful in the end.

I will now discuss the two books separately. Scott's was first written in the 1920s and published in 1933 as *The Influence of Music on History and
Morais: a Vindication of Plato. Although revised and retitled for its 1959 edition, it is still very much a book of the 1920s. One admires, in the context, Scott’s outspokenness and the courage with which he held to his unpopular views of the place of music in society, but he was hindered by musicological and, one must say, philosophical naivete. The book is in large part an “esoteric” history of music, seeking to document the changes that have taken place in it from Atlantean times up to the twentieth century. While one cannot confirm or deny what he says of the prehistoric epochs, when he comes to known history one can see plainly the limitations of his time and situation. Scott’s knowledge of the music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, for example, is exactly what one would expect of a not very well-read musician on the 1920s, at which time these periods were familiar only to musicologists. In his historical survey he mentions no composer between Guido d’Arezzo (born 990) and Orlando di Lasso (1522-95), and he thinks that seventeenth and eighteenth century France was merely a nation of tinkling clavecinistes. There is no point in exposing his other naivetes: it is too easy for a musicologist to poke fun at him today.

The theme of Scott’s book, however, is philosophical or even esoteric as much it is musical: it is that changes in music actually causes changes in human society and in human consciousness. From his reading of Plato, who writes in the Republic and the Laws of the effects of music on public morality, Scott surveys musical and social history with an eye to such changes. Thus he regards Handel’s music, because of what he hears as its excessive sobriety and propriety, as a cause of the stuffiness of the Victorian age in England, which so admired Israel in Egypt and The Messiah. To this he contrasts nineteenth-century France, so different in morals (!), where Handel had no particular effect. Scott writes on the increase in sensibility caused by Chopin’s, Mendelssohn’s and Schumann’s music, resulting respectively in the emancipation of women, the foundation of charities and the abolition of slavery, and an increased sympathy for children. Jazz and Rock appear as part of a scheme of the Higher Powers to make sex a more open affair, its energies to be used for good or ill; while the extreme dissonances of Schoenberg and his followers actually serve to shatter evil thought-forms, necessary before a more euphonious “new music” can appear. These are a sample of his historical interpretations.

There is a lot of truth in what Scott has to say, and his prophecy of an eventual return to concord and harmonic laws has certainly proven true in recent years. But things are not nearly as simple as he supposed. For example, I would suggest that the influence of music on moral evolution is far more a matter of composers (like other artists and writers) having felt long before the less sensitive public the stirrings of psychic influences. In putting these before the public in their works, of course they contribute to
their realization, but they do not simply cause them. Jung’s concept of synchronicity could usefully be invoked here, and I am sure that it would have appealed to Scott, had he known of it.

Unfortunately Scott knew of little outside of Theosophy, and his own persuasions, exemplifying the worst aspects of the Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater school, did nothing to encourage him to learn any more. In later editions he explains why: he tells the reader that his book has been written under the close guidance of the Theosophical Mahatma Koot Hoomi, whom he contacted first through a medium, later through his own visions (and, one gathers from his autobiography, those of this second wife).

Koot Hoomi, who according to later Theosophic lore had been Pythagoras in previous incarnation, is held virtually responsible for the book, all of it having been submitted to him for approval and much of it having been revealed by him. One therefore has here a document of considerable cultural interest as forming part of what one might call the “Koot Hoomi Canon”. For whether or not Koot Hoomi began life as a figment of Madame Blavatsky’s imagination, he has certainly taken on independent existence since her death, appearing repeatedly in visions, through mediums, and even in tangible form. He is credited with the inspiration if not the actual writing of a number of books, and his activity continues to this day. One might compare him to the mythical adepts of alchemy, from Hermes Trismegistus to Fulcanelli, who exist in the minds of their devotees and readers irrespectively of their degree of earthly reality — and who sometimes serve as excuses for all manner of occult aberrations.

My study of Scott has convinced me that he was a man of complete integrity and sincerity. Therefore I can only regard him as either (a) a channel for a genuine communication (from Master, daimon, égrégoire, errant influence, or whatever), or (b) as having unconsciously projected his own ideas, receiving them back from his medium or visions as often occurs in such cases. I favor the second alternative, mainly because of the complete absence in the book of anything original, i.e. of anything that Scott could not have got from his own knowledge of Theosophy and musical history. If he had not been so confident that he was merely a channel for the omniscient wisdom of the Master, he might have written a better book. As it stands, Music, its Secret Influence is an insult to the intelligence of any Master it claims as its source; and the same can be said of the rest of this kind of “revealed” literature.

Dane Rudhyar, on the other hand, claims no supernatural source for his work. With only his own knowledge and understanding, ripened by decades of meditation and experience, he displays a wisdom far superior to that of “Pythagoras reborn”. He sets out, as he says, to understand “how a culture-whole [i.e. a separate civilization] evolves, and how each stage of its evolution is expressed in a particular approach both to music as an art
and to experience of tone... to elucidate what the foundation of music has been in cultures that have remained close to the vibrant power of life and to the experience of the magical and the sacred, to explain how music became intellectualized and set into abstract and quantitative molds, and to evoke the possibility of a future type of music integrating the values of the ancient, non-European past and those of our complex Western music”. This exploration shows a breadth of culture that cannot but command respect; by the end one comes to feel a warm human sympathy for the man who, frustrated in his early ambitions to be a successful composer, has reconciled himself simply to pointing the way to the music that a new age might realize. The primitive and the sophisticated, the Eastern and the Western all have something to contribute to this holistic vision of a new musical order. Such a thing, however, will only come to being “in a metamorphosed society — a new culture based on new symbols, inspired by new myths and a rebirth of the sacred”.

The mythic past of music is important to Rudhyar; indeed, he says that Music itself “is a myth in which the actors are tones uttered by the creative-destructive, transformative-regenerative power of the One Life...”. Music is thus a microcosm reflecting the universal order — and disorder. He respects but cannot altogether embrace its Apollonian side, representend in theory by Pythagoras and in practice by J.S. Bach: it is intellectually satisfying, yes, but it is limited by its exclusion of the magical, the primitive, the “holy disorder” of Dionysos. For this reason, no doubt, his own compositions and his new vision of “Dissonant Harmony, Pleromas of Sound, Holistic Resonances” go beyond the laws of the harmonic series to embrace the whole realm of tone in a halo of gong-like sound. It is a letting-go of the compulsion to control one’s world as an individual, a confident surrender to Nature. At the same time, Rudhyar is able to write one of the finest expositions I have ever read of the Harmonic Series and its symbolism. He devotes a chapter each to the Seven and the Twelve as manifest in the musical system, and on their resonances in other realms such as those as astrology and the Tarot.

Besides his self-reliance, Rudhyar had the advantage over Scott of the new science of ethnomusicology, and of all the knowledge and practical experience of the musics of India, China, and “primitive” cultures that has been made available since World War II. His is therefore a far more universal vision of what music is and of what it can be. Besides that, the problem of modernism is no longer the simplistic debate it may have been in the England of the 1920s, between beautiful mysterious Impressionism and nasty dissonant Expressionism, with wicked Jazz somewhere on the sidelines. It is the situation of the 1980s, in which disillusion with wilful ugliness is giving birth to a “post-modernism”, and every form of fusion is taking place between Jazz and Rock, both of these and Classical, historic and modern styles, East and West. It is now more difficult but far more
rewarding to write such a book on the universal questions of music, and Rudhyar's work reflects this richness. As a result, he shares with many Theosophists of broad persuasion the conviction that the West can no longer continue in cultural isolation from the East. One obvious reason for this is the evident common root of all speculative musics in the nature of tone and number, recognized as clearly by the ancient Chinese as by Pythagoras. All efforts to renew the art return to this natural ground, but there is no reason for them to repeat the peculiar evolution that has occurred in the West. At the same time, the preservation in India, especially, of completely different ways of making and using music gives one ideas of how to supersede the stultifying musical museum of the Western concert-hall and conservatory. The encounter with non-Western musics, in turn, suggests ways out of the impasse into which the main tradition (especially the Germanic tradition) of Western composition had got itself, devoid alike of inspiration and of public appeal. The East, finally, has never suffered such a break between "classical" and "popular" as has occurred in this century, to the great detriment of both fields.

Until recently Scott's book has often been the first to come to the notice of those interested both in music and in esotericism, and because of the lack of competition in its field it has enjoyed success beyond its merits. With the appearance of Rudhyar's book, the situation has changed, and one hopes that it will similarly be read in several languages for the next fifty years, after which it in turn will no doubt become a historical document. Scott's was a book for the beginning of the "modern" era: Rudhyar's is for its end.

Joscelyn Godwyn