

MUSIC IN DECLINE

Review of Constant Lambert, Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline (London, 1934: Faber), Spectator, 11 May 1934, 745–6



MR LAMBERT'S approach to his subject is wholly admirable: it is not technical, but humane; his prose is vigorous, intelligent and gay, and pours itself out in loosely constructed sections like the conversation of an exuberant and many-sided artist who talks with eloquence about his art. The result is an extremely able and entertaining book which is very nearly, but not quite, everything that is at present needed. The average spectator of contemporary music, brought up among the ordered contrasts of the Victorian scene, is lost in the war of styles and tendencies both preached and practised by small, but intensely self-conscious and jealous, coteries. To such Mr Lambert's aid is most valuable: like all good artists who criticise their art, he has more to say, and says it more

eloquently and more boldly, than many a cautious and learned author of a formal treatise.

The greater part of the book consists of an onslaught upon the dominant schools. He is at his most violent and destructive when he attacks the group of Parisian *pasticheurs* gathered round the leading figure of Stravinsky: his tone grows almost personal, as of one who but lately was himself half a follower, [746] but soon definitely revolted against the slick and lifeless formulae, the recipes for synthetic melody, which he found in place of any genuine will to create. He is perhaps particularly vehement because for him this represents a *corruptio optimi*, the betrayal of the nationalist movement in Russian music which was begun by the genius of Glinka, and reached its apex in the great masterpieces of Mussorgsky and Borodin: it is quite plain that it is to the Russians that Mr Lambert has really lost his heart, far more than even to Debussy, whose crucial importance he fully recognises and on whom, indeed, he is very interesting; and this allegiance colours everything he writes.

Russomania is unquestionably the most attractive form of musical extremism, and Mr Lambert, in spite of many enthusiastic asides on Chabrier and Satie, betrays all the symptoms: his homage to Balakirev, his more than tolerant acceptance of Tchaikovsky ('whatever his limitations as a symphonist he is undoubtedly one of the world's greatest melodists'),¹ the peculiar violence of his indignation with Diaghilev and Stravinsky for prostituting their own heritage, as later also that of other cultures, in turning out exotic *bibelots* to tickle jaded Western palates; all this points to the nature of the author's delightful infatuation. He occasionally betrays the vices of his excellences, as when in his anxiety to expose Stravinsky's decadence he systematically underestimates his originality, not only as an orchestrator or as a parodist (surprisingly enough, Mr Lambert appears to mistake parody for serious, if meretricious, writings) but as a creative artist. Perhaps he assumes that his readers will take that for granted. Perhaps they will.

Since it is part of Mr Lambert's express intention to survey music against the background of the other arts, his many analogies of music with literature and painting are both relevant and suggestive, even when overdrawn through his excessive love of a completely symmetrical parallelism. To take an instance: there is a

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great deal that is common to Schoenberg and James Joyce; their development from the shallow *fin de siècle* sentimentality of their beginnings to the culminating points reached in *Ulysses* and *Pierrot lunaire* is oddly similar; but here the parallelism ceases. The 'neurasthenic horror',² the inverted, twisted, masochistic romanticism of Schoenberg has no counterpart in Joyce's *Work in Progress*,³ which is a detached and frigid experiment with words conducted in broad daylight, and is at the opposite pole emotionally to the slow and stifling nightmare which is the felt background of everything that Schoenberg writes. This is, however, a fruitful exaggeration and in the right direction: so little that is at all intelligent is written about the atonalists that when something is, it seems perverse to carp at detail; Mr Lambert is exceedingly convincing when he describes the emotional cul-de-sac at which the atonalists have arrived, but he fails to indicate what in his view is the right road to pursue. The weariness with diatonicity which led to all the various secessions, to quartertones in Prague, polytonality in Paris and atonality in Vienna, is itself an established fact which cannot be doubted or abolished. And Mr Lambert refuses seriously to explore the value of the roads taken by, for example, Alban Berg or Bartok, though he frequently mentions both, and with respect.

Rejecting the sincere and sterile, Mr Lambert receives with acclamation anything which seems to him to be eloquent and imaginative, from the hot jazz of Duke Ellington and the oddly moving underworld studies of Kurt Weill to the splendidly isolated figure of Sibelius. To the last he sings his final paean, and looks upon him as the dominant genius of our generation. If this is no passing admiration, nor merely desperate flight from the dismal chaos of secessionists and post-secessionists to some lofty figure, withdrawn and lonely, *au-dessus de la mêlée*, we can only record our disagreement. Sibelius is a dignified and sincere artist, who sometimes achieves noble expression, but so are Delius and Bruckner. If he is their superior, he is so in degree, not kind. In literature his counterpart is, let us say, Thomas Mann; he represents that reputable second-rateness which corresponds among the musical public to the middlebrow characteristics whose disappearance is lamented by Mr Lambert. Even so, he is

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³ [The working title of *Finnegans Wake*.]

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incomparably more distinguished than either the *Gebrauchsmusiker* of the type of Hindemith, who is rightly regarded as no more than an exceptionally gifted journalist, or, worst of all, the mild and arty earnestness of the ‘folksong’ group of British composers, who contrive to be at once more boring and more embarrassing than one would have thought it possible for any music to be.

All these are mown down without pity by Mr Lambert, whose melancholy thesis may thus be regarded as at least half proved; that music has reached an impasse is true, but Sibelius provides no solution.

Whatever doubts may be felt about the author’s judgement, there is no doubt that the book is very good. In case surprise is felt at the apparent discrepancy between the title and subtitle, the answer is in the epigraph, which runs thus:

ALL: The music, ho! [*Enter Mardian the Eunuch.*]

CLEOPATRA: Let it alone; let’s to billiards.

William Shakespeare

And it is upon this highly entertaining level that Mr Lambert holds his long and brilliant discourse.

There is some reckless treatment of foreign names, such as Dargomizhky (for Dargomyzhsky), *Die Unaufhörliche*, Al Johnson and the inevitable Greig.⁴

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⁴ [*Das Unaufhörliche* is a work by Hindemith; Al Jolson and Edvard Grieg perhaps need no gloss.]