

# Misunderstood Rhythms

BY FLETA CAMPBELL SPRINGER



IN these unfinished days we can write down nothing with finality. If we would record the times with any truth, we must forego the use of periods and force our sentences to no full rounded end. A phrase, a single word, detached and without context, striking itself out above the tumult, bears more significance than all the careful argument of yesterday. Perhaps, if we are to make a record at all, we shall need to employ a kind of futuristic scheme—the method of the imagists—of Gertrude Stein—and put down each word as it comes to us, no matter how absurd it seems. For constantly, recurrently, struggling out of the chaos, some meaning seems trying to make itself plain. Out of the discordant *mêlée*, some mighty harmony is striving to resolve itself. Themes emerge, tenuous, fragile—sink, and emerge again—strange, fragmentary rhythms—chords sudden, dominant, and loud; all to be overwhelmed and lost, at last, in the tremendous cacophony of the age.

Here, then, I shall attempt to capture and set down, with a more or less impressionistic pen, certain of those same fragmentary rhythms which, recurring frequently enough, and vibrating upon the memory of other rhythms heard long since, and causing them to sound anew, have seemed to me at least to compose themselves into one such clearly discernible theme.

You remember the marching armies of France. If not there, you have seen them here, in the war pictures, on the screen. And you remember how they seemed not to be marching at all, but just so many individual soldiers going forward together in the same direction; so many highly personalized Frenchmen trotting happily along, some with long steps, some with short, diminishing,

accelerating, no attempt at keeping time, the same diversity in dress, in equipment, in mood, expression, temperament. We were puzzled at first, and then we laughed a little, and said, "Do they call that marching, I wonder?" We had in mind our own straight ranks—left, right, left, right—every footfall exact, every angle alike, every movement the same—parts of a single body, moved by a single brain. We thought of them pridefully; there at least no one could touch us; there we were really superior! For a long time in France we Americans gave one another a little fraternal, indulgent smile whenever there passed one of those ragged-edged detachments of veterans in horizon blue, *musettes* bobbing grotesquely about their waists, some straggling, some hurrying to get ahead, but all keeping in a kind of general way together, as they moved along the middle of the street, on the way, perhaps, to entrain. "Marching!" we would say, knowing, of course, what we meant.

But, though much of the old order changeth, pride still goeth before a fall. One day, watching some French military manœuvres near Paris, the wife of an American army officer stood by my side. Across the field before us formations of soldiers moved, progressing with that curious, unrhymed, running step, met, wheeled, weaving and interweaving intricately, to emerge in formation again—all with that astonishingly informal effect of keeping together spontaneously.

Beside me the American officer's wife spoke suddenly, "How beautifully they do march, these French!"

"What!" I said. "What! After our men?"

"But the French are the most perfect marching men in the world," she said.

I knew that she, as an army woman, ought to know more about such things than I, but, if she said *that*—well, it was

only another evidence of that ridiculous prejudice some Americans have for everything French, and I couldn't let it go.

"They're so—unmilitary," I said, "from our point of view!"

"They hold all records for forced marches, endurance, and speed. Nothing need be more military than that!"

I began to see that she meant it, then.

"But they don't even keep time! They've no sense of *rhythm*, as our men have—"

Her astonishment stopped me. "Rhythm?" she cried. "*Rhythm?* Look!" She gestured with one gloved hand. In one compact blue cloud the soldiers advanced, sweeping toward us across the field. "See how they flow," she said, "like water, like sand; not a forced step among them; it's the rhythm of the mass, *mass rhythm*, that they've achieved. Surely you must see how beautiful it is!"

And abruptly I saw. The scales, so to speak, dropped from my eyes, and I could see the truth of what she had said, and the beauty of it, too. The French swept forward, a rhythmic mass, composed of many intricate rhythms, the contributing, collaborating rhythms of many men, more complete and compact than our own, which, after all, is but an infinite multiplication of one rhythm—no counterpoint, no shading, and no subtlety.

It is the difference between Debussy and (irreverent comparison!) Sousa.

That day opened my eyes to many things. I saw that it is that same quality which runs through everything in France. It is in their intricately shaded thought, in their music, in their art, in their apparently frivolous accomplishment of serious deeds. All Americans must have felt it at first. I recall a remark of my own, repeated with some frequency during the first weeks I spent in France. It was to the effect that I was surprised to find that the French, who, I had always been led to believe, were a graceful, lyrical people, had, in a crowd, in shops, in the street, no sense of rhythm at all. For at first we are jostled and elbowed in the street, or, what is more annoying, always just escaping being jostled and bumped into and elbowed. We complain

that the French never seem to know where they're going; they never flow as our crowds do at home. We decide that it must be because Americans have better nerves than the French, and better manners, oh, far better manners, in public. And we forget that it is *our* nerves that are frazzled in trying to elbow *our* way through the French crowd, and that they continue self-centered and gay, not even aware of our remarks or our rage. We think with longing of the old crowds in New York, flowing incessantly along in two steady, amiable streams, one up and one down. And then we notice that the Americans who have lived in Paris for several years seem to have no such trouble as we. And after a while we ourselves come less and less to clash with them; we are beginning to get on within the rhythm, so to speak. And we perceive a kind of "filtering" process going on—for that is the word which best describes the movement of the Paris crowds, they "filter," fast or slow, so that within the confines of Paris a vast movement, at once harmonious and intricate and difficult, goes on—a filtering process, as of thousands of separate little particles, well defined, no two alike, bound hither and thither on projects of their own, yet all making up Paris, and so all France.

The little railway trains with their miniature engines trundle about over France like absurd baby-carriages, and arrive with irritating promptness at the most remote destinations, deposit your luggage with equally irritating completeness on the platform, and trundle off, hooting ridiculously, into the distance. Nothing is more maddening to an American on his first stay in Paris than the efficiency of the underground "Metro" trains. We get our educations in the Subway in New York, but lose yourself for an instant in a paper or magazine in the "Metro," and you've run past your station, no matter how far distant it had seemed. And the intricate simplicity of the signs and colored maps at every stop, sending you right in spite of your determination to get lost!

These experiences are multiplied a hundred times a day. One sets out to go to the Boulevard des Batignolles. One

finds oneself in the Boulevard de Courcelles. It is surely the neighborhood. It ought to be, one feels, the very spot. One goes on a few paces and inquires of a gendarme the way to the Boulevard des Batignolles.

"*Ici, madame!*" says the gendarme, bowing and spreading his hands to indicate the very street in which one stands.

"But this is the Boulevard de Courcelles!"

"*Non, madame, c'est le Boulevard des Batignolles.*"

"But the sign?" One points over one's shoulder to the sign, not ten steps back.

"Ah! Where the sign is, *oui, madame*, that is the Boulevard de Courcelles! Here, where madame stands, the Boulevard de Courcelles has become le Boulevard des Batignolles!"

And there you are! Arrived, yes, but not *regularly* arrived. One would almost rather not have arrived at all! And there is nothing, nothing whatever, to be done to the gendarme.

I remember a strapping blond fellow, American, whom I overheard in the Boulevard des Capucines inquiring the way to the Boulevard des Italiens. The gendarme assured him, gesturing, that it was immediately before him; he was already there. The American glanced along the street, recognized apparently some landmark of the Boulevard des Italiens, glared at the gendarme an instant, turned, and as he turned he said, aloud, "Damn!" and marched on in disgust.

All this, you see, is just as soothing as it would be to dance a slow, dreamy, swinging waltz with a partner who insisted upon jiggling and hopping and putting in fancy steps.

A matter, purely, of tempo—of rhythms, conflicting, misunderstood.

Here, then, emerges the theme. And, once the theme has appeared, how quickly the variations and the progressions write themselves!

Has every race a rhythm of its own? Is that the secret of our difference? Occultism, that mad, estranged little sister of Science, would cry out, delightedly, "Yes!" but that is her trouble—she has never learned to say "No." Musicians know most about rhythms, but if I were a musician, I should in

all probability be fascinated by the mere idea, and begin composing a concerto for my favorite instrument based upon the theme, without the slightest interest in its falsity or truth. Mathematicians should know; but if I were a mathematician, well, that is what I should be. I should likely insist that two and two make four, and be entirely unable to understand how two and two make sometimes twenty-two.

No, I submit that this is a matter for the layman's view; that for this kind of thing, glimpses are truer than examinations, more accurate than scrutinies. . . . You see, I cry, "King's excuse!" before we begin. I absolve myself from responsibility. I am only telling you things I have heard and seen, and the speculations they have set going in my mind.

In the West, I had a Japanese girl friend, named Toyo. And one summer night we were walking together along the street of the California town where we lived, when for the first time it occurred to me that, since she was wearing American shoes (she wore always Japanese dress, except for the shoes, which were like my own), there was no earthly reason why she should shuffle along like that, with those silly mincing steps, four to my one.

"Toyo," I said, "can't you walk any other way? *Must* you walk like that?"

She laughed, and her merry black eyes glinted little lights. "No," she said. "I can walk like you, if I try. See! This is American girl!" She was before me, striding widely along, in the most grotesque and inimitable bit of pantomime, —Toyo, demure, exquisite little Toyo, her arms, free of the flowing sleeves, swinging exaggeratedly to the athletic stride of an American college girl! Suddenly she paused and looked back at me, her graceful head poised in an attitude purely Japanese. "You like it?" she asked. "That is you!" and prepared to go on again.

I caught her sleeve and pulled her back to my side. "Please!" I begged. "Please! Never do it again! *Are* we as dreadful as that?"

"It is for *you*," she said (her pretty hands were folded again within the voluminous sleeves), "but it is not for *me*; I am Japanese." She was shuffling

along softly beside me again, four steps to my one. . . .

Is not that same diminished rhythm plain in everything Japanese? In their art, their speech, their architecture, in the agile receptivity of their minds? Is it not that difference of rhythms which makes me, though an inch under her height, look and feel a giant in Toyo's Japanese garden, while she, in her flowing robes and her little shuffling step, seems so perfectly to harmonize?

Why is it that the tone of the voice changes, takes on a different key, when speaking a foreign tongue? Why must we shout German, and use an unnatural heaviness of tone, and thumping gestures to correspond? Why do we speak French in a higher key, and faster than English, and spread the hands, and lift the eyebrows, and shrug the shoulders, and, I actually believe, think of more graceful, witty things to say? Is it that we adopt unconsciously the vibration, the rhythm of the people whose language we speak, and that languages are built out of the harmonics of the race?

There are the Chinese, who remain unknown to us because they live within a rhythm which we do not understand. We speak of the "inscrutable face" of the Chinese; yet the faintest flicker of an eyelid is as expressive among Chinamen as a complete facial contortion among men of an Occidental race. Their music we usually, on first hearing, deny to be music at all. We are not hearing what they hear. They make use of enharmonic intervals too subtle for our Occidental ears. Their speech is made of delicate inflections, shaded intonations; their poetry and art reflect them, too. And their philosophy is realmed in such alien spiritual overtones that we call them heathen, and send missionaries to give them a solid base to build upon.

And so it goes. Who will deny the unity that runs through Spanish life? The sun-filled valleys, and the rugged, cruel hills. The languorous dance, and the sudden stamping heels. The soft, accented speech. The sentimentalist—and the quick hand on the hilt. . . .

And who will say that Russian music and the Russian ballet have not done more than all the books to elucidate Russia to us? A stage filled with people,

leaping, stamping, whirling, turning, at a tremendous speed, and through it always a kind of tragic gaiety, an irresponsible profundity, which filled us just at first with a sensation half akin to fear. Nijinsky in "Petrouchka," grotesque though he was, will forever remain one of the most deeply pathetic figures of the stage. How he accomplished it I do not know. Perhaps it was the music; perhaps it was Nijinsky's art. Whatever it was, it was something ineffaceably Russian. One could merely acknowledge and accept it as that.

Who has heard "Boris Godunow" this year and not felt that he has veritably witnessed the tragic disintegration of Russia to-day. "Boris" has ceased, mysteriously, to be the Czar of the opera, and has become, instead, the anguished soul of Russia itself. There is an almost too vivid analogy in that bit of "insane music" at the end of the second act, where the lurking madness of Boris overtakes him alone, when the music becomes for an instant so intolerably, so subtly disintegrating that all one's faculties seem undermined, and one must in another moment cry aloud for some power to stop the insanity, for any authoritative force to take its place. One would welcome Lenine, or the old Czar, so he proved himself sufficiently strong to command.

But no one, so far as I know, has blamed Moussorgsky for the Russian tragedy. Yet we have heard often, and seriously, that Wagner's music caused the war.

They say that Wagner's message of violence entered into the soul, the will, and finally the body of the German people; that Wagner set going in their minds the rhythm of violence, the dream of power through might, and so brought on the war. I, for one, would rather lay it to the docile sentimentality of the old German songs, which set up a rhythm the outcome of which was to make it possible for them to heavily, unquestioningly, repeat a thing until they believed it to be true, and to go on repeating it until it grew into a kind of fanaticism, and they moved, self-hypnotized, to their own doom.

We should not forget that Wagner was a revolutionist, and spent years in exile for refusing to conform. He was a

builder, and a sustainer of principles. I came across, in moving last autumn, a little ragged, bethumbed note-book filled with all sorts of things in the handwriting of the intense young person I must (from the note-book) have been at nineteen. In it I found a page written after hearing Wagnerian music for the first time, played by an orchestra in Texas! No, incredible as it may seem, I had never heard Wagner until I was nineteen. Nor, doubly incredible, had I ever been told how sadly my culture lacked. We were pioneers, and in the little Western towns where we lived the few people who had pianos were not up to Wagner, nor was he a topic of daily conversation in the home. There was the town band, which—well, as to fanatical repetition, I spoke feelingly a moment ago; I know what it drives people to!

And so, since the young person who wrote it can never return to convict me of plagiarism, I submit that note as the evidence of an entirely unprejudiced witness almost phenomenally free from outside influence in the case of Wagner. It begins with the splendid authority of youth, thus: "Wagner plays on all the seven planes at once. One hears the changeless inanimate base of solid rock—the vivifying growth of vegetable life—and the stirring abroad of animals; then through all the planes of man's existence—physical, emotional, mental, spiritual—until the music seems to leave the body, mounting higher, finer, free of earthly things, up to the very summit of heaven itself. I think there is not an atom in me unresponsive to his music—all at the same instant—even to the 'permanent atom' that is myself and knows what I am not aware of knowing. I am swept up and abolished into it." Well, I couldn't have written it to-day. I could not be so sure. I have cluttered my head with too many things, and have heard all the things that people say, and listened to fierce arguments of partisans. But the responses of that age are fresh and true, and music that can have that effect upon nineteen is not bad, is not destructive music, but curative. Heroic treatment, to be sure, but it is of that the world has need. And I believe and pray that there are men in Germany to-

day whose souls are tuned to those great harmonies—men who, like Wagner, refuse longer to conform, who have broken the chains of tyranny, and who also will prove themselves builders, and sustainers of principles.

And now, ourselves! Is it possible to segregate, out of the medley that is in America, a rhythm strictly our own? We come back to our soldiers again. When our men went into uniform and began to appear on our streets, singly, in groups, and in parades, we saw, with a start of surprise, that those men bore the features of an unmistakable race. And those uniforms revealed other and deeper unities, equally new to us. In France, where all the races of the world were gathered during the war, one saw the contrast best. One saw why the French spoke always of the "calm" of the Americans, of their "gravity, their youth, and their size."

"Who are these giants," a writer in a Paris journal asks, "who walk calmly by, looking in at our second-story windows—giants imperturbable and blond, with the serious faces of youth?" And again, "There is a smaller model, more slender, and more fine, *un modèle supérieur*, but cast in the same mold." So their unaccustomed eyes discerned and emphasized the type. And so it seemed revealed to us. So we discovered how true, in spite of its many crossings, the Pilgrim stream has run. How, in our look, our manner, our speech, and in our very gait, there is still somewhat of the sober stride of the Puritan fathers on their way to church. And in the music to which we march is an echo of their old straight-rhythmed hymns. It is not in New York that we see and hear these things, for there we have had to adjust ourselves to many alien steps; but America of the Middle States, of the North, of the South, of New England and of the West, there the rhythm beats, strong and dominant and sure. Our music, that which was really American, was built into that regular straightforward rhythm. You remember our popular songs, our two-steps that had whole phrases taken from Methodist hymns, so that going to church became an ever-present vexation to the feet.

Musicians of the later generation grew



impatient of that staid rhythm, and realized, all of a sudden, it seemed, that something must be done to break its regularity. And so they went at it in their own "American" way, which was a direct and dominant way. They took a hammer and broke it, and so created, if a process of destruction may be called creation, our American syncopation, our "broken time," and so, in a climax of destructive creation, "jazz."

That more lasting, beautiful, and artistic things will come of this same impulse, are coming now, have come, indeed, is evident every day. A young American is at work now upon a composition for piano, which he calls "Kaleidoscope," passages and bits of which I have had the fortune to hear. It reproduces, in music, precisely the effect of that delightful optical toy in which we see, by merely turning it in the hand, an endless successive variety of beautiful colors and geometrical designs. He brings to completion his harmonic design, crystallizing it static an instant, then letting it fall apart into its myriad colored notes, which resolve themselves immediately into another design, more brilliant, more barbaric, more fairy-like, than the last. Now and then one is held longer than the rest, as if a child held the toy breathless in his hand, trying not to move, hoping *that* design would stay—a tremor, a slipping of one or two bright particles out of place, and suddenly the whole figure is gone, and there before the eyes is a new one equally lovely and strange. It is as ingenious, as simple

in structural plan, and as fascinating to the grown-up's ear as is that amazing toy to the grown-up's eye.

In all this runs the quality truly American and truly of to-day. There is youth, and the old dominant rhythm which is our heritage and which will remain always ours; but there is also the new thing—we have become testers, impatient of old forms no matter what their excellence, ardent devotees of change. And we are discovering beauty with a never-ending amaze.

Some, to be sure, have traveled, and have brought back sophistication from foreign lands. They have thought to drown out the old rhythm with others more to the cosmopolitan taste. But the old dominant rhythm is going on all the time underneath, so that the others but jangle them both out of tune.

And this, perhaps, may be the meaning of the theme. If, in the vast orchestration of the earth, each race has a part to play, a rhythm to sustain, and if we could be persuaded to conceive of it so, might we not each well grow more zealous that our performance be not, at any rate, the one to disturb the harmony? Should we not more carefully attend to the beauty and perfection of our own individual score than if we believed it to be merely a solo part, dependent upon nothing, nothing dependent upon it? And perhaps we should be brought to see how its value lies in its difference, as does the value of every part, and, for pride in the symphony, be more vigilant to respond to the great Maestro who conducts.

## Poppies

BY GRACE HAZARD CONKLING

WHEN I grow old  
 And dull and cold,  
 I'll warm myself again  
 Where poppy petals drift and fall  
 Like drops of scarlet rain,  
 Thinking of gallant soldier-men  
 With poppies for a pall.  
 When I forget their deeds, oh then  
 Come Cold and Dark and all!