

JAZZ AND GUITAR¹

BY ÉDOUARD COMBE

My title is one that MM. Duvernois and Dieudonné have used for a comedy in which they have presented the contrast between two types of women, two kinds of love. The jazz-band symbolizes modernism and dancing — that whole superficial existence in which women have forgotten even the idea of real love. The guitar, on the other hand, is intended to suggest the sentimentality of moonlight serenades, simple, old-fashioned love, naïve enough, but so sincere that no one could think it ridiculous. I have often thought of that contrast since André Segovia came into prominence and we saw what a great artist could do with the guitar. Even earlier I had often reflected on the jazz-band and wondered what its contribution to modern music would prove to be. The purely musical contrast between these two is quite as sharp as the symbolic contrast, and in its way as interesting.

Let us take the first of them, the guitar. It comes to us to-day as a resurrected instrument. Everyone thought that the guitar was dead, used only by a few blind beggars, and almost solely in Spain; even in Spain it had come to be used exclusively in accompaniment, either for the voice or for a singing-instrument such as the violin, or for the mandolin. Its interest for us was purely retrospective, historical, almost archæological. It took an interpreter of genius to re-discover the guitar, to reconstruct its

technique, and, above all, to give it back its soul. Then, all of a sudden, the scales fell from our eyes. The guitar was not what we used to think it — a poor, limited, monotonous instrument. On the contrary, it proved to be marvelously rich in resources of all kinds, an instrument from which can be drawn a quite unexpected variety of sound, and which in its vast range — four octaves, like the alto and the clarinet — may well be compared with the monarchs of the instrumental solo. Add to this that its mounting of six strings makes possible full chords and polyphony. The volume of sound is not great, but this fact is redeemed by its quality — mellow, distinguished, and aristocratic.

The guitar is mounted and tuned like the lute. All the music that has been written for the lute can be used on it. Its destiny was the same as that of the lute when the growing popularity of the harpsichord ousted it from favor. After hearing Segovia it is easy to see that this was an illogical confusion, and that the reasons for giving up the lute should have served for keeping the guitar. The harpsichord was certainly an advance over the lute, because its keyboard made possible the simultaneous use of both hands and thereby doubled its resources. It went even further as soon as the two keyboards were adopted, along with duplication of strings and varied uses of the plectrum. Far be it from me to underrate the harpsichord. Wanda

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Landowska has shown what can be done with that instrument and how necessary its use is in interpreting the music written for it by the clavecinists and virginalists. It remains true, nevertheless, that the harpsichord is a plectrum instrument and that therefore its expressive range is rather limited. It cannot entirely avoid the disadvantages due to striking the string with the metal, feather, or leather quill.

We had thought for a long time that the defects of the lute and the harpsichord were inherent in all instruments with plucked strings. To-day we must revise this judgment. These defects are inherent only in instruments played with the plectrum, whether it is held in the right hand, as with the lute, or is operated mechanically by the touch, as with the harpsichord. There are other plucked-string instruments that more or less escape these disadvantages — those in which the strings are plucked directly by the fingers, like the harp, and, above all, the guitar. Because of this manner of plucking, both of them are very much more expressive; but when we have heard Segovia, and then a few days later the harp quartette of Madame Casadesus, we realize irresistibly that the guitar is the superior instrument. In harp-playing the two hands must pluck strings that have been tuned beforehand and that give only a single tone; in the harp with pedals every string can produce three tones, to be sure, but only one at a time. The expressive variety in the stroke is definitely limited, and the quality of the sound can be only slightly modified — except by using harmonics, as does likewise the guitar.

But Andrés Segovia reveals to us what a marvelous qualitative range and flexibility the guitar possesses in the hands of a virtuoso. His magic fingers

make that instrument reproduce all the registers of the harpsichord. He can render simultaneously as many tone-colors as there are voices, so that one has the illusion of hearing four distinct instruments. But how expressive all these timbres are as compared with those produced by the plectrum. The guitar is the only instrument of its class capable of singing, and Segovia has shown us that in this respect it is superior even to the piano. The sensitive flexibility of the unprotected finger-tip in contact with the string is apparently infinite. By methods I cannot explain, the finger communicates directly to the vibrating medium the emotions of the artist, whereas with the piano this must be done through the intervention of the keys, the double escapement, and the hammer. In the guitar, action and reaction are immediate. The instrument is, as it were, a direct extension of the player.

Those of my readers who have not heard Segovia may smile at my enthusiasm, and many who have heard the artist may object that he is an unparalleled master who will have no equal. But Madame Landowska also may remain without a peer in her chosen field. None the less, she has revived the harpsichord, and we already have several artists who play that instrument with skill. Segovia may be unsurpassable, but I do not believe that he will be alone. Even now we observe signs of a similar revival of interest in the guitar, especially in Germany. Certain composers, some of them the most promising of the younger generation, are writing scores exclusively for it. On a programme containing only original music for the guitar, it is now possible to add to the names of Bach, Visee, Sor, Tarrega, and all the other lutists and guitarists of the past, those of the best modern

composers. An instrument for which masters are writing is not a dead instrument. The guitar, like the harpsichord, has taken a new lease of life.

The case of jazz is very different. It has contributed to music a single new instrument — the banjo, a kind of Negro mandolin. The banjo has remarkable sonority and a very special timbre. It seems to me that it could easily replace the mandolin in Mahler's symphonies, for example, and it would come out still more clearly in the midst of the bow instruments.

The other instruments of jazz are already familiar, — the piano, the violin, the trombone, the saxophone, and the trumpet, — but these instruments are purposely diverted from their ordinary rôles and grouped in novel arrangements. The search for strangeness is perceptible even in classic jazz — the only type that can claim a serious artistic value, for I shall neglect the wild eccentricities of certain dance orchestras. A characteristic trait of jazz is the systematic inhibition of instrumental sonority. Muted instruments are almost the rule in jazz, whereas in the ordinary orchestra they are the exception. The result is a reduction of power in the trumpet and trombone that brings them close to the bow instruments. The association produces a chamber-music ensemble with a slightly bizarre effect. But above all, — and in this jazz is perfectly logical, — the dominant factors in the synthesis are the percussion instruments, which are never silent, and which sometimes actually assume solo rôles. The fact is that the jazz-band, designed to render the purely rhythmical music of savages, has had to upset all the values of traditional music, which is primarily melodic and harmonic. Thus we see the violin, which takes first rank in a symphony orchestra, relegated to second rank in

the jazz-band, whereas the saxophone, the 'poor relation' of the orchestra, is its solo instrument par excellence, abetted by those two other monarchs of the modern dance-hall, the trumpet and the trombone, both muted. The rôle of the banjo is to lend a special color to the ensemble by contributing its twang to the general sound-effect and accentuating the rhythm marked by the percussion instruments and the piano.

One bizarre feature of jazz is the association of instruments, not ordinarily used in close collaboration — each class of the percussion, string, and wind instruments respectively being represented by only one or two examples.

Are we to consider the jazz-band a passing phenomenon, eccentric and ephemeral, coinciding with the taste for exotic music and a certain type of dance, and destined to disappear with that taste; or a permanent, definite enrichment of music in general? In support of the first opinion it might be pointed out that the jazz-band does justice only to a single kind of music. Play the repertory of modern dances written for the orthodox orchestra, and the result is pretty spiritless, unless the jazz-band is reinforced; and this is as far as contemporary composers have gone. Try to render the music of the old dances or any other type of music with the jazz-band, and the result is hopelessly bad, and even ridiculous. At large dances, where slow waltzes, or even Viennese waltzes, are played along with fox-trots and tangos, the jazz orchestra is seconded by another combination, so that, in reality, two orchestras function side by side, one of which plays a certain type of dance, the other another type — two entirely distinct manners alternating. Sometimes it is simply that the players change their instruments. In this case

the point is still more striking. When the saxophonist takes up a violin or violoncello, he admits that he cannot otherwise do justice to the written music. He demonstrates the separation of the types.

The second thesis can also be defended, however, and it would be wisest to admit that both outcomes are possible. The craze for modern dancing may pass, the great mass of music written for jazz may fall into the most complete oblivion, and yet music itself may still be enriched by the experience in a perfectly definite way. Let us consider in just what that enrichment would consist.

We must admit that, although most dances composed in the rhythm of the fox-trot, tango, or one-step have little or no value, there are, nevertheless, a certain number of happy inspirations, pretty and really musical compositions, especially among the fox-trots. This is a direct enrichment of our musical patrimony. But it is not the most important one; for in addition to this there is an instrumental enrichment. This is not in the sphere of the muted instruments. Jazz has been too willing to abuse such effects, and they are not its best feature. The expressive glissandos of the trombone are an eccentricity justified only by a desire to astonish. This effect is inseparable from a certain class of compositions, and is of little use in any other music. I have already pointed out how the banjo might directly enrich the orchestral ensemble by introducing a new timbre to be used for special effects. But what the jazz-band has chiefly brought to our attention is the resourcefulness of the saxophone as a solo instrument. There can be no question that the saxophone will survive. From now on no composer will deliberately reject its services.

A still more important contribution

remains to be considered, because it is not simply an addition to the gamut of timbres, but to the very essence of music. No one who has heard the best original compositions of the jazz repertory can doubt that it has developed a new type of counterpoint, freer and more fantastic than that of the schools, but extremely interesting, and calculated to switch the new music back to the polyphony it was on the point of abandoning. This counterpoint is often improvised under the form of variations that change at every repetition and demand a player trained in this kind of performance. This will bring us back to old traditions that have long been lost, or preserved only among the gypsies. The restoration of these traditions may be considered a positive contribution. It is not merely a matter of melodic ornamentation or homophonic variation, but of a genuine counterpoint, of an improvised melody accompanying the principal motif but sometimes monopolizing the attention and becoming a principal motif in its turn, while the original theme, already heard several times, takes on the character of a *cantus firmus*.

This counterpoint is at once melodic and rhythmic. Polyrhythmics is one of the principal charms of jazz music, closely allied as it is to ragtime and conceived only as violently syncopated. Harmonically this type of music has brought us nothing new. It is based on a few stereotyped sequences and on a special use of the ninth.

In the domain of harmony the jazz-band leads us back into the paths of simplicity. It is tonal, healthy, and genuinely harmonious. Its innovations are in the sphere of melody, and, above all, of rhythm. In that of melody it has introduced certain turns directly borrowed from exotic music; in the sphere of rhythm it has introduced a dislocation of the measure that results in

very amusing effects, and the superposition of inconsistent rhythms.

In this last connection, the jazz-band is only a manifestation of the irresistible impulse toward the enrichment of music by a return to a very old conception of rhythm. This conception had been forgotten since the Middle Ages, but was on the point of being rediscovered by a study of the ancients and of folklore — a conception of which Jaques-Dalcroze was the theorist and the apostle. The Negro music that has come to us from beyond the Atlantic has contributed its stone to the rhythmic edifice of the music of to-morrow. It is a permanent contribution.

In addition to these gains for the art of music in general, we must also include the direct use of jazz by composers, whether they write works inspired by it and intended for it, or introduce it subordinately into more extensive works in which it alternates with the complete orchestra. This last method will have the happiest results in the theatre. On the other hand, we can hardly accept the idea put forth by a certain American that a theatrical piece can be composed entirely for the jazz-band. In such a work the

chief defect of this instrumental combination would be only too quickly apparent: that is, its inherent monotony, a monotony that rapidly becomes intolerable. Like all effects that are too strongly emphasized, those of the jazz-band soon produce weariness and nervousness. This is certainly the reason why a constant need is felt in dancing circles for some other type of dance to alternate with jazz. This need is forcing musicians more and more to play two instruments, or even a larger number. The monotony of the rhythm and the timbre of jazz is so great that the uninterrupted execution for several hours of one fox-trot after another would certainly exacerbate the nerves of the listeners to a point not far from madness. When time has given us a better perspective we shall recognize that jazz has its utility, and honor it according to its very real merits.

At that time, perhaps, the guitar too will have reached the high rank to which it is entitled. At the moment I cannot deny that, if I were asked to choose between a concert by Segovia, or one of his peers, and the most admirable jazz-band in the world, I should not hesitate a moment — Segovia would be my choice.

A LEADER OF FASHION

BY THOMAS HARDY

[*Adelphi*]

NEVER has she known
The way a robin will skip and come,
With an eye half bold, half timorsome,
To the table's edge for a breakfast crumb:

Nor has she seen
A streak of roseate gently drawn
Across the east, that means the dawn,
When, up and out, she foots it on:

Nor has she heard
The rustle of the sparrow's tread
To roost in roof-holes near her head
When dusk bids her, too, seek her bed:

Nor has she watched
Amid a stormy eve's turmoil
The pipkin slowly come to boil,
In readiness for one at toil:

Nor has she hearkened
Through the long nighttime, lone and numb,
For sounds of sent-for help to come
Ere the swift-sinking life succumb:

Nor has she ever
Held the loved-lost one on her arm,
Attired with care his straightened form,
As if he were alive and warm:

Yea, never has she
Known, seen, heard, felt, such things as these,
Haps of so many in their degrees
Throughout their count of calvaries!