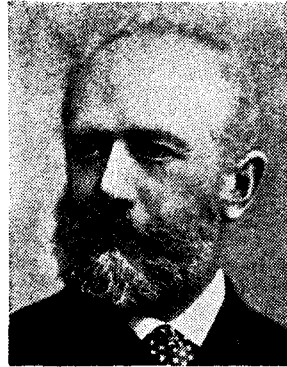


TCHAIKOVSKY'S PIANISTIC WARHORSE

By ABRAM CHASINS



PERHAPS the most emotional aspect of criticism is the fear of emotion. The failure to weigh human values and human responses has produced some of the most short-sighted criticism in the whole passionate history of music. Academicism does itself no good to seize upon works which have become popular through their emotional appeal and scorn them categorically as tinsel.

In my student days I met my share of those practitioners of music who periodically take temperatures in compositional affinities to find symptoms of Tchaikovsky fever. I was well on my way to becoming a guilt-ridden hypochondriac when I came upon Beethoven's words written on his Mass in D. "Written from the heart; may it go to the heart." As I read it a melody suddenly ran through my head: it was the second subject of the final movement of Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony. Then and there I resolved to rediscover Tchaikovsky for myself, to get away from those who generalize their antipathies into Esthetic Truth, and to cease being the kind of idiot who pokes holes in a man's work without the smallest ability to differentiate between justly popular music and sham.

Since then I've met battalions of music-lovers who confess a love for Tchaikovsky's greatest works with the abject humility and helplessness with which they would confess to alcoholism. Is it because he wrote some pretty inferior music? So did others. We don't judge Beethoven by his Romance in G. Is it our taut twentieth-century's rejection of the intuitive for the intellectual? It can't be, for the public adores Tchaikovsky's masterpieces and artists love to play them. No. People have been taught to regard their communion with Tchaikovsky as musical immaturity. They have been sold a false criterion: it arises in blind hostility to some simple emotion; it rejects the expressive content in a work of art, and betrays an insecure musical culture.

Certainly we all have the right to love or hate anything we choose, but it is irresponsible to appraise any-

thing as great because we love it or to call it bad because we hate it. The value of a work of art lies in many matters on many levels, none of them isolated from each other. A flaw in much that passes for criticism is to pounce upon one quality and to ignore all others. No profound insight is required to discover Tchaikovsky's lapses. No more insight than it takes to discover the lapses of those arbiters of musical fashion who show themselves incapable of recognizing good music from bad. When we are scolded for reacting favorably to a work or for not reacting to another which orthodoxy insists ought to inspire us because it is marvelously made, we can legitimately maintain that it is quite useless for us to know how we ought to react when we don't.

We must be careful, however, to acknowledge our responses as subjective feelings and not ask that they be given the weight of objective facts. We must also not claim to be music-lovers unless we try constantly to extend the range of our tastes and in every direction, and are prepared to

find those tastes varying in degrees of enthusiasm from time to time. In turn we may ask others not to tell us that a quality which moves us is a defect, for that is as far from the truth as the Philistine convictions that a fugue is an intellectual exercise or that chamber music is "thin."

Tchaikovsky had the divine fire, and nothing short of ignorance can question the compositional mastery of his human documents. In his last three symphonies, the overtures "Romeo and Juliet" and "Francesca da Rimini," "Nutcracker Suite," Third String Quartet and many other works, his dramatic and touching spirit speaks to humanity of elemental matters. Their frailties are as nothing compared to their emotional force, their melodic power, and originality.

In the light of such intense and lovable aspects of Tchaikovsky's art, pedantry descends to an unrealistic level when it repudiates them. It denies one of art's primary missions: to reveal the inner life of the emotions. That, incidentally, is one way in which the ascetic schools of contemporary music estrange themselves more and more from concert-goers, the concert-goers for whom romanticism still glows with a lovely light wherever it appears: in Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, or Prokofiev.

Tchaikovsky's piano masterpiece is the Concerto in B flat minor. It is not necessary to contend that it is a flawless work, nor would I claim that it represents my idea of the perfect concerto plan. But it does represent Tchaikovsky's ideas and that seems somehow quite sufficient. On occasion
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"And for our anniversary he gave me a diamond needle!"

Arthur Honegger, 1892-1955

By EVERETT HELM

THE recent death (November 27) of Arthur Honegger at sixty-three presents a classic example of the "radical" in youth who comes to be regarded in late years as a "conservative" by the youth of that time. It is somewhat an unhappy fate and in Honegger's case an unfair one. For the future will not ask whether he wrote *avant-garde* music or not; it will be concerned solely with its quality. Judged on this basis it has, we venture to predict, a good chance of survival. Not all of Honegger's work will enjoy immortality, for he wrote weak pieces as well as strong. But so, for that matter, did Beethoven and, to cite a more recent example, Richard Strauss.

It seems likely that, just as Strauss will be best remembered for three or four operas and several tone-poems, Honegger's future fame will rest on a half-dozen works, which we think will include the oratorio "King David," the stage work "Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher," the "Liturgical Symphony," the "Symphony for String Orchestra and Trumpet," and the Fifth Symphony, called "Di Tre Re." The work which thrust him into the category "radical," "Pacific 231," will remain little more than an historical curiosity. It is difficult to imagine, thirty-six years later, how the musical world of the 1920s could possibly have attached so much importance to this piece. It is an orchestral imitation, so to speak, of the sounds of a train—a piece of illustrative music remarkable only for the tricks of orchestration employed.

"Pacific 231" and a similar experimental work "Rugby" (1928) lie quite outside Honegger's main creative stream. He was in his heart not a "bright young modern" but a thoroughly earnest and serious composer, touched by a strong vein of mysticism, which finds its most intense expression in "Jeanne d'Arc" and in the "Symphonie Liturgique." "Jeanne d'Arc," composed on a text by the great French poet and apologist for Catholicism Paul Claudel, is probably his masterpiece. In a kind of modern mystery play that employs spoken and sung text, mixed chorus, children's chorus, and orchestra, Honegger has here written one of the none-too-numerous works of contemporary music that appeal to a very wide



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Honegger—"he stood outside all schools."

audience. In this and in the apocalyptic "Symphonie Liturgique" Honegger gives voice to the hopes and fears that plagued his complicated nature—a strong religious feeling on the one hand and a pessimistic realism on the other.

Those of us who had the privilege of knowing Honegger cannot but regret his early death. Not only was he a highly gifted composer; he was also one of the most pleasant and most charming of men. The gentleness of his demeanor was matched by a quiet but ready wit. There was no vanity in his character, nor was he touched by those feelings of personal ambition or professional jealousy that all too often mar the tempers of composers. He was a generous colleague, happy at the success of his friends and interested in their works, while modestly belittling the success of his own. "As to my own success," he wrote in 1950, "I attribute it to the fact that my career began in a climate entirely opposed to ours—after the armistice of 1918. . . . We young composers found all the doors open."

The Group of Six, of which Honegger and Milhaud were the most illustrious members and which represented in the 1920s the most radical trends of French music, did indeed enjoy a particularly happy situation; yet Honegger's forthrightness in admitting this fact is noteworthy. Speaking of

that time, he says in his autobiographical book "I Am a Composer": "We thought that another war was impossible, that the world would move towards science, art, and beauty." In his last years, however, Honegger was of quite the contrary opinion. His statements in "I Am a Composer," are pessimistic to a degree. "I believe that we are living the last instants of our civilization; these last instants are necessarily painful. . . . Social progress regiments each individual into a concentration-camp kind of life. It makes the existence of an independent being almost impossible. . . . What can possibly be left over for the arts and for music? Do you really believe that a creator of spiritual values, who is the prototype of individualism, still has the possibility to survive, to dedicate himself to his art, to write music?"

"I Am a Composer" is a thoroughly depressing book, and one wonders in reading it to what extent its pessimistic outlook was conditioned by the long illness that hung over Honegger's last years. It contains a good many clues to Honegger's attitude towards composition and to his music. He writes, for instance: "Composition is not a profession. It's a mania—a sweet folly. Composition is the most mysterious of all the arts. . . . a great part of my work stands outside my own volition. A good composer finds the golden mean between prose and poetry, between craftsmanship and inspiration."

From such quotations it will be seen that Honegger's was essentially a romantic nature. His music is equally romantic, both in spirit and style. He describes himself as a "double national." Born at Le Havre of Swiss parents, he spent most of his life in France but retained a strong Swiss atavism. In his youth he came under the influence of Richard Strauss and Reger, then of Debussy and Fauré. Later Stravinsky, Schönberg, and Milhaud played a part in molding his style. Unlike many of his French contemporaries he did not believe in a return to harmonic simplicity. He never shouted with Satie "A bas Wagner!" On the contrary, he believed in making full use of the entire accumulated experience of music, including the sum total of harmonic material. He stood outside of all movements and schools, an independent whose works will survive sheerly on their intrinsic musical merits.

