

YOUNG ROMANTICS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

BY LEON VALLAS

AFTER the war the new nations, or rather the old ones just freed from political bondage, all rushed anxiously forward to reveal their individual characters to the world. The Czechoslovakian republic was one of the most eager and desired above all to be made known through her artists, particularly her musicians. Concerts in many lands spread the fame of her best composers who had been without great renown outside their own country.

The display was somewhat disappointing but the cause is not to be traced exclusively to the scores. Audiences attempted to discover immediately a common, national, ethnic quality in compositions of very different periods and feeling, something to be found only in a few pages directly inspired by popular Slovakian art, which is quite different from the Czech. They were surprised and dismayed, demonstrating thereby a certain degree of geographic naïveté.

Popularly, the young Czechoslovakian nation had been pictured as isolated in the middle of Europe, bounded by frontiers as clearly defined as the graven lines and colors on the new atlases designed after the Treaty of Versailles. In reality, Bohemia or Moravia, situated in the midst of Central Europe, had been completely engulfed in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its art was subject to the same influences as other European nations and might have been expected to receive an even stronger foreign imprint than it did, by reason of Germany's proximity and through the education acquired by her artists.

The virility of the country, fostered by the population's traditional hostility toward Austrian or German influences, could not possibly be expressed on each page of every composer's

music. Her musicians are occidental and not oriental in the manner of Rimsky-Korsakow. They should be judged with this in mind. There is no reason why Czech music, just because its authors are Slavs, must resemble that which borrows melodic elements from the Orient. Yet this illusion, geographic as well as artistic, has influenced the attitude of more than one dilettante towards the art of the young Czechs. The misunderstanding is aggravated by the failure of these artists to respond to the influence of Debussy which has left its stamp on the music of most other countries, and by their violent romanticism, a fashion which elsewhere has long since been discarded.

Certain scores, precisely those which, because of their nationalism, have the greatest value for Czech ears, are not understood at all by the foreigner. This is true not only of the most ambitious of Smetana's operas, tributes to the history of Bohemia, but also of a symphonic poem by Josef Suk, entitled *Prague*. In the new republic this score has become a sort of vast national hymn. It was conceived by an ardent patriot, to celebrate the heroic chronicles of the great city. It recalls deeds unknown to strangers or long forgotten,—the struggles of John Huss and his disciples, the battles against the papists and the acts of violence of the Protestants in 1618. Such a composition must be heard as an epic, not judged as pure music.



Before the war Dvorak and Smetana represented Czech art almost exclusively in the minds of musicians. They have not been played very much since, but the day will come when Smetana's comic operas will take their place in the repertory of the principal theatres of Europe and America. The difficulty so far has been that a literary translation is almost impossible. For the same reason Leos Janacek, one of the still living fathers of Czech art, has encountered even greater obstacles to triumphs abroad. A professor of musical composition at Brno, he has a disdain for laws and rules, and is chiefly interested in bringing

out the melody and the rhythm of accentuation in the Czech tongue, in stenciling music on the language.

The best known composers belong to two generations; one might say they are the child and the grand-child of Smetana. To the first belong Novak and Suk, to the second their disciples, Vycpalek, Kricka, Vomacka and Stepan. A romantic spirit animates the work of Vitezslav Novak. Many of his compositions are inspired by the popular songs of the nation. Even the titles of the three parts of a string quartet are I. *Tcheque*, II. *Morave*, III. *Slovaque*. Many melodies of the provinces have been harmonized by him. The foreigner likes these transcriptions better than his other works, favoring especially the symphonic poems whose musical descriptions are marked by an excessive precision and a profusion of detail.

Josef Suk, his contemporary, is known all over the world as the second violinist of the Czech Quartet. His works are full of a touching confidence, one of the best examples of which is his suite for piano, *O Matince*, a setting of the poem of a lover regaining the joy of life after a frustrated affair of the heart. Novak and Suk, when not inspired directly by folk-lore, seem to follow Schumann and Wagner. The music of J. B. Foerster, their elder, does not suggest the Czech character to the foreigner, seeming rather to be grounded in German aesthetics.

The younger musicians best known to Europe since the war are the disciples of Novak and Suk, their very faithful friends. The promotion of their music is carried on chiefly by their indefatigable comrade, Vaclav Stepan, whose works, together with those of Vomacka, Kricka and Vycpalek are the ones most frequently heard today.

In their music also, romanticism is the chief characteristic, a romanticism often grave and expressive, but at times verging on buffoonery. The best known work of Boleslav Vomacka is a piano sonata in one part. The trio of the scherzo, at once funereal and fantastic, is admirable. Certain grave melodies by Ladislav Vycpalek arouse curiosity about his principal composition, an important oratorio glorifying the destiny of man. The *Fables* of Jaroslav Kricka, already translated into other languages, are destined, by the grace of their popular swing, their

wit and their musical humor to attract a wide public. Their sprightly recitative seems directly derived from Moussorgsky, while they employ ironically and most drolly, certain grandiloquent Wagnerian formulas. Written in an idiom that is not at all new, indeed, by the European standard, old-fashioned, the works of Novak, Suk, Vomacka, Vycpalek, awaken charming echoes. Their force, which is not without persuasiveness, is emotional rather than purely musical.



The chief composer of this young school is undoubtedly the admirable pianist, Stepan. He is not yet thirty-five, and, though originally not schooled in the art in which he is now so successful, beginning as a musical amateur, he has since acquired a thorough training, and is among the finest pianists and composers of our time.

An eager nationalist, he carries the work of his compatriots and the popular songs of his country everywhere. Several collections of Czech and Slovakian airs have been published by him which faithfully respect the vocal text but are supplied with rich, new, pianistic accompaniments. His female choruses, of popular inspiration, are written in an extremely complicated manner that demands execution by virtuoso choristers; but they are also impressive by their rhythmic variety and intensity.

His romantic fervor inspires him to express the drama of his own and his country's life with an exuberance which it is hard to resist, whatever may be one's aesthetic taste. Three works of broad dimensions already bear his name—*Les Premiers Printemps*, a quintet for piano and strings, the product of his youth, the *Sextet* (1917) and the *Poème* (1920).

The *Sextet*, which has been performed by the Czech Quartet, was inspired by the war. In the last ten years more than one composer has been ambitious to write the symphony of that struggle. We now have this often attempted work written for six instruments only, by a young Czechoslovakian who has de-

monstrated an ability to impose on us a merciless will. The logical sequence to this *Sextet*, which is a whole sonata condensed into one movement, a symphonic poem of nationalist inspiration, is the duet for cello and piano that is known as the *Poème*. It represents the happy peace of man—*Beautiful Season of Life* is the Czech title. It was written only a few months after the liberation of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia. As in the *Sextet*, the musician seems to create his sonata form according to his changing emotion. It is not possible for the hearer to label the pattern of this complicated work, he can only be carried along on its movement, which binds slow passages with animated rhythmic interludes so subtly that one is unaware of transitions.

It is not possible to predict Stepan's future. No doubt he will gain a definite place for this music so revealing of himself, a nature sometimes solemn or troubled, sometimes smiling, always pleasing. No artist's work is more representative of the land from which have come to us some of the greatest composers of the past.

