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MUSICAL LIFE IN GENEVA

By FRANZ WALTER

Geneva is expanding at an extraordinarily rapid rate, which unavoidably causes numerous problems, of which not the least is housing. However, with its 250,000 inhabitants, Geneva is still a small town despite its importance internationally. But it is perhaps artistically that Geneva is already a big capital. Four playhouses at present cater for the needs of dramatic art lovers. But it is certainly in the sphere of music that not only is activity the most intense, but also that Geneva has acquired a real prestige.

This is due in large part to the powerful personality of Ernest Ansermet, who has created and fashioned a symphony orchestra which has won international fame. And so the twelve subscription concerts given by this orchestra remain the core of the musical life of Geneva and are always entirely sold out beforehand. Ansermet conducts about half of these concerts, and the others are entrusted to the most famous foreign batons. In this connection, it should be mentioned that Ernest Ansermet, through his interest in contemporary music, has for quite a while now made Geneva a centre of modern music. But, disquieted by the paths taken by recent music, Ansermet has devoted years of thought and experimentation in an effort to penetrate and explain the sense of musical language. This study has made him delimit its appropriate boundaries and finally reject all strictly atonal music. He has recently published an important book which has provoked quite a sensation ("The foundations of music in the human consciousness"), in which he expounds his theories and convictions. That is why also the programmes of his concerts have now a rather conservative tendency.

But these subscription concerts form only the kernel of Genevise musical life. The Swiss Romande Orchestra itself gives many other concerts, some at popular prices, and numerous organizations each year bring in several famous foreign groups. Let it suffice to mention that the orchestras engaged for the present season are the Zagreb Philharmonic Orchestra, the Danish National Orchestra, the Wiener Symphoniker, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and perhaps others which slip my mind. There is a similar richness among the chamber orchestras. Geneva has several of its own, and the most celebrated groups, whether from Stuttgart, Zagreb, London or Paris, regularly call at Geneva. As for the list of artists who come under the fire of the Genevise critics — known for their severity — it would be a vain task to start on it. We will only mention the interest aroused by the recent or forthcoming visit of Soviet artists, such as Oistrakh, Richter, Guillels, Gutnikov or the Borodine Quartet.

Among the private organizations — also countless — we should mention those which militate in favour of contemporary music, including the new music of which the public remains somewhat chary, and in particular refer to the support given by Queen Marie-José (who resides in the canton of Geneva and who not only organizes concerts of new music in her home, but has also instituted an international composition contest). This reminds us of the "Concours international d'exécution musicale de Genève", which each Autumn causes the same effervescence to reign near the Conservatoire. Geneva, moreover, is the headquarters of the European Association of Music Festivals and of the European Association of International Contests. To stress still further the musical activity of Geneva in

the private sector alone, I shall give as an example the CERN (European Centre for Nuclear Research) which organizes concerts in its own auditorium — a perfect concert hall — and which not only engages local groups but brings in the best foreign ensembles such as the La Salle Quartet of Cincinnati due to play shortly.

But without any doubt, the most important event in the artistic life of Geneva was the re-opening of its Opera House. Partly burnt down in May 1951 as a result of a fire which broke out during a rehearsal of the "Walkyrie", a first reconstruction plan of the "Grand Théâtre" was rejected as too expensive by the citizens who were asked to vote on this project. It was only twelve years after the fire, and after many bitter discussions, that the new opera, which finally cost far more than the original estimates, was able to reopen its doors. The inauguration took place on 10th December in a feverish atmosphere. For weeks work went on round the clock so that the hall and stage could be ready on time. The management of the new "Grand Théâtre" has been entrusted to Mr. Marcel Lamy, ex-Director of the Paris "Opéra-Comique", whose first success was putting on a very brilliant spectacle on the date actually fixed and despite still imperfectly-working machinery. It was Verdi's "Don Carlos", in its original French version, which had been chosen for this inauguration and which was a great success to which the public contributed, the latter having caused a feverish activity to reign for many a month in the dressmaking world in preparation for this event.

It was then Maurice Béjart's "20th Century Ballet" which occupied the stage, followed during the New Year festivities by an operette by Maurice Yvain, "The Black Pirate". Wieland Wagner then put on his Bayreuth production of "Tristan and Yseult", and "Pelleas and Melisande" marked shortly afterwards the centenary of Debussy's birth, while awaiting the performance of Molière's "Bourgeois Gentilhomme" by the Comédie française, for the theatre will also give some plays.

These first manifestations were, above all, an occasion to admire the new hall, with its 1,500 seats, which is undeniably a remarkable success. Technically, the specialists are unanimous in declaring that the scenic installations are the most up-to-date imaginable. After having favourably commented on this auspicious beginning made under difficult conditions, the Genevise critics, while praising the magnificent level of "Tristan" (with Anja Silja and Wolfgang Windgassen), manifested in a fairly lively manner their disappointment with the production of "Pelleas" and in particular criticized the poor taste of the scenery.

The artistic circles of Geneva aspire to see not necessarily revolutionary productions, but at least a modern spirit. The production of Debussy's work, by its old-fashioned character, was precisely the opposite to this. So the management will have a difficult job to satisfy an exacting public, henceforth on the lookout for any new faux-pas. The following spectacles — "Rigoletto", "La Tosca", "Ariadne" and "Bluebeard" (by Dukas), "The Castle of Bluebeard" (by Bartok), "Il Seraglio", "Faust" and "La Perichole" — will certainly be the object of heated discussions. Finally, the first world performance of Frank Martin's two-act opera "Monsieur de Pourceaugnac", inspired by Molière, is announced for the end of April. (Association des Intérêts de Genève.)