

Maurice Ravel on Jewish Music

By DAVID EWEN

New York.

I BELIEVE that we Jews should turn, from time to time, to outstanding figures in the Christian world, and have them evaluate us from their own viewpoint.

I, therefore, decided to visit so great a composer as Maurice Ravel to have him discuss the achievements of the Jew in the field of music. How does a world-famous composer react to the Jewish influence in music and what are his opinions on great Jewish composers?

I should like to make it clear from the very start that, notwithstanding the many rumours that have been circulated, Maurice Ravel is not a Jew. He was born in the French Basque country (in Ciboure), and both his parents were Christians. The reason so many musicians and music-lovers erroneously think of Ravel as a Jewish composer is that he composed six Hebrew melodies of genuine poignancy and authentic Hebrew flavour.

I asked him how it was that he, a Christian, should have wished to compose Hebrew melodies. "It is because I am a musician," he replied. "Why did I, a Frenchman, at one time in my life attempt to compose American music? (Note: The second movement of Ravel's *Violin Sonata* is a "blues" melody). Simply because a musician can never judge where his inspiration will come from. As a musician, I am attracted to a certain type of music and then, when I feel that I can compose well in that idiom, when I feel themes and melodies in that idiom cluttering up my mind, I set pen to paper and I compose. That is the best way I can explain my composing Hebrew melodies.

"At the time of composing these melodies I was attracted to the strange and haunting beauty of Hebrew music. I felt, almost, as though I had been brought into a new musical world when a few authentic Hebrew melodies were brought to my notice. I was so bewitched by the mysterious colour and exotic charm of these melodies that for weeks I could not get this music out of my mind. Then my imagination was set aflame. My mind began to conceive other melodies, similar in structure to those I saw, but melodies which were born with me. Finally, I decided to put my thought upon paper. The result was my Hebrew melodies, and they were written—if I may say so—in one burst of inspiration."

How was it that Monsieur Ravel did not compose more Hebrew music?

"I suppose it is because the Hebrew spirit is not in my blood. My admiration for the ritual music of the Jews is as keen and as intense as it always has been, but I no longer feel this music keenly. And when I do not feel music, I cannot compose it. Some day perhaps, I'll compose other Hebrew melodies, when the spirit moves me to do so. But I must be moved very deeply, before I compose in an idiom which is radically different from my own."

What does Ravel think of Jewish composers?

He began with Meyerbeer. *Le Prophete*, for all its stained-glass artificiality, was to him a classic of orchestration; the musical ideas here were worked out and developed magnificently. "To me, *Le Prophete* is really the first of the music-dramas. And to think that it was composed so many years before *Rienzi*! I am quite sure that if it had not been for Meyerbeer, the character of Wagner's music would have been quite different—so marked was this Jew's influence upon the great German composer!

"I dismiss Mendelssohn because—although I have often been touched by the beauty of his style and the chaste simplicity of his music—he has never really influenced me, or any other earnest composer, very profoundly. Mendelssohn is an apostle of beauty, and in his greater moments has produced a music which is of the purest and more rarified beauty. But his influence was never, I feel, very



Maurice Ravel

marked. From my point of view, it is Meyerbeer and not Mendelssohn who is the greatest of all Jewish composers of the past."

And what about modern Jewish composers?

Ravel hesitated momentarily: "I don't like to express myself very freely on modern composers because, being a modern composer myself, praise or blame might be considered tactless. However, it is almost a truism that the Jew is a tremendous figure in modern music; how can any honest musician help but confess it. Schomberg with his *Pierrot Lunaire*, which is the very peak of abstract polyphony; Milhaud of France, who was the most gifted of the younger French five; Ernest Bloch in America, who is of a powerful and passionate nature, and one of the most electric figures in present-day music—these are only a few of the many Jews who are helping to fashion to-day the music of to-morrow."

"Are you acquainted with the music of such young American-Jewish composers as George Gershwin, Aaron Coplan, etc.?" I asked Monsieur Ravel.

"Only superficially, I am afraid," he quickly answered. "I have long felt that the qualities that the Jew has brought to musical creation are originality, a limitless imagination, a fine feeling for beauty, and an independence of spirit."

Bnai Brith Magazine.

In all Parts of the Country

THE

JANE PLOTZ PORTRAITS

are always in demand because of
their consistent High ART and
QUALITY.

Jane Plotz,
Thrupp's Bldgs., Pritchard St.,
JOHANNESBURG.

Grain Bags,
Woolpacks,
Twines,
Fencing Materials,
Groceries,
Produce,
Etc., etc.

Send for
PRICE LIST.

MOSHAL GEVISSER (Pty.) Ltd.
MERCHANTS.

52, Queen St.,
DURBAN

Telegrams:
"BUSYBEES."
P.O. Box 1183.