

# The Passing of Maurice Ravel

By Edgar Bernstein

DEATH has robbed the world of another great Jewish artist in the person of Maurice Ravel. Born in France, he was throughout his life devoted to his fatherland; but he was equally devoted to the race from which he sprang and remained to his dying day a loyal son of Israel.

Ravel was one of the most distinguished of modern composers. Perhaps "modern" is in itself the wrong adjective to apply to him. He belonged to no school of tricks and sensationalism such as the appellation "modern" usually implies. He derived from the great masters of music, and his work followed classical lines. His music was deeply influenced by his Jewishness, even when he was not writing specifically Jewish pieces. Actually, he composed only a few purely Jewish works; but the racial spirit of romantic grandeur infused him and entered into all he did. France gave his music colour and air; Israel gave it much of its depth and shade.

Of most prodigies we hear little after life; but Maurice Ravel was a child prodigy whose brilliance remained with him and grew into the mellow power of sustained genius. He composed his finest music in maturity, not in youth, and even that is occasionally rivalled by the exquisite beauty of some of the work that belonged to his last years.

Ravel was born in 1875, and almost from the time he walked showed a keen interest in music. He was an accomplished player by the time he was ten, and began to compose in his early teens. His first notable achievement came in his twenty-sixth year, when he won the second Prix de Rome with his cantata "Myrrha." The judges had much praise for this composition; but Ravel himself thought little of it. He said sarcastically that he had written this down to the standard of the judges, not up to the standard of the masters of music. It was significant, both of his ambition and his power, that even in those days he counted himself by implication among the masters, and was exacting in his criticism of his own work.

Ravel is often classed as an impressionist through the fame of his brilliant composition "Scheherazade"; and a certain talented impressionism runs through many of his

works. But one does not find this uppermost in his masterly "Daphnis and Chloe," the ballet generally classed as his outstanding achievement, which had the honour of presentation by Diaghileff in 1912. This ballet moves with a vigour and force that captures the heart from the outset. Brilliant in technique, it has sacrificed nothing to this aspect. Its characterisation is strong, its melodies supremely beautiful. It is marked, in the main, by an absence of impressionism, for at that time Ravel was becoming convinced that the impressionistic style was dangerous for a musician who had much to tell, since it often led to effect being secured at the cost of construction, and in most of his subsequent music he took great pains to pay the most careful attention to architectonic.

Ravel's familiar orchestral work, "Bolero," owes its interest chiefly to the fact that it proves that volume of sound depends less on the number of the players concerned, than on the precise distribution of notes among the instruments.

Yet he was in no sense hide-bound by respect for classical traditions. He was daring in the liberties he took with the classical forms of music. With Beethoven, he believed that rules were essential, but that a master might break the rules when his work justified it. He took liberties with rhythm and harmony at which many critics frowned at the time; yet the compositions in which he acted thus have become permanent adornments to music. The first of these was his "Jeux d'Eaux," with its scintillating arabesques; notable among others that followed were his "Tzigane," "Habanera" and "Valse Nobles et Sentimentales."

Apart from its depths and shadows, can one say to what extent Ravel's Jewishness influenced his work? It is a difficult, if not impossible task. A great deal of his melodic richness undoubtedly springs from distant Jewish sources; and it may be that the Jewish background, with its epic history of change made him the more amenable to change and experiment in an art which has been, in the main more conservative, in its finest aspects, than any other. Who shall say? Sufficient for us to mourn his passing and to recall, in these few words, the rich gifts he gave to the world of art.

# Going Back to School

(From An Occasional Correspondent)

IN common with the general school population of South Africa, our Jewish children will go back to school next week. To many children the 27th of January will mean the beginning of their school career, and this is an opportune moment to draw the attention of our parents to the necessity of giving their children a sound Jewish education.

Much has been written recently on the subject of Jewish education in this country. But whatever the shortcomings of our present system, it ought to be realised that the Talmud Torahs of South Africa have in recent years made considerable progress. Only a few weeks ago we had the pleasure of publishing in our columns numerous reports of school functions, speech days and distributions of school prizes held in connection with the festival of Chanukah in various parts of the country. In all instances it was evident that the Hebrew School claims to-day the attention of large numbers of pupils, parents and communal workers. In the bigger centres—in Durban, in Port Elizabeth, in Bulawayo and, more recently, in the Mother City—the shabby Cheder housed in the back rooms of Communal Halls and Synagogues has made room for spacious and modern Talmud Torah buildings. The very fact that the subject of Jewish education has recently proved such a controversial one, shows that the community is beginning to take a lively interest in the problems of the Hebrew school and that there is a keen desire for reform and improvement.

In the long run the future of the Hebrew school in this country lies almost entirely in the hands of our fathers and mothers. Our classrooms will inevitably lead to better teaching and better preparation, and no amount of effort on the part of committees and parents will be in a position to provide a good Jewish grounding for a child whose Hebrew schooling consists of a short period of preparation for the Barmitzva ceremony.

A normal Hebrew school for his child should be the desire of every Jewish parent, and it is perhaps necessary to mention that this applies to girls as well as boys. Statistics have shown that far too many of our girls receive no Jewish education at all, an anomaly which seems to be rooted in certain traditional prejudices. The future Jewish mother deserves a sound education as the father and parents are urged to make a special point of offering their daughters the same facilities for Jewish education as are provided for their sons.

As for the wider aspects of the issue, that which has been said and over again by visiting Zionist leaders must be emphasized and reiterated. The very future of the community depends on the Hebrew education which we offer to our children, and at the beginning of each school year an opportunity is offered to every parent to help in the building of the Hebrew School by sending their children to the Talmud Torah promptly and regularly.

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