

A Study in the Artistic Conscience by Robert Speaight

Some few years ago I received a letter from Jacques Maritain, asking me if I could do anything to promote the performance in England of Arthur Lourié's opera *Le Maure de Pierre le Grand*. This was based on a tale by Pushkin and extracts from it had been given by Stokovski with the Philadelphia orchestra. I did not know the work, and I had no influence in such matters. In the same letter Maritain declared that the time would come when Lourié would be recognized as the greatest composer of the century. That time has not come yet: Lourié's work remains practically unknown, except to a few initiates. Until more performances of it have been given, and recordings from it made, it is obviously difficult for the rest of us to confirm Maritain's opinion – whether we are musicians, or people like myself who are extremely fond of music. In the meantime curiosity is stirred by the publication of Lourié's occasional writings under the title of *Profanation et Sanctification du Temps*.¹

Lourié and his wife are now living in Maritain's house at Princeton and Maritain's opinion is that of a close friend to whom this book is dedicated. It is supported, however, by independent and competent judges, like Henri Marrou, an eminent *humaniste*, and the musical critics Fred Goldbeck and Boris de Schloezer. Their testimony is printed as an appendix to this volume, which is admirably prefaced by Jean Mouton. The title is taken from a lecture given in 1963 at the Dominican monastery of La Tourette where the problem of *Dieu et le monde moderne* was under discussion. Lourié has no illusions about the *monde moderne*!

“The most typical phenomenon of our time is the manifestation of art under the appearances of evil and ugliness. Diabolic ugliness is the only aesthetic reality of the present day. The mark of Satan stares at us indecently from pictures, book-covers, magazine advertisements and newspapers . . . Even certain children's drawings, nowadays so much in fashion, seem to have a really demoniacal character; they are irregular, dislocated and chaotic. There is nothing surprising in this since many children have not been baptized, and therefore freed from devils by the exorcism of the priest.”²

These were uncompromising words, but they reflect Lourié's uncompromising Christianity. He had been converted when he was quite a young man, after a reading of Anne-Catharine Emmerich.

¹Desclée et Brouwer.

What was true of the visual arts was also true of music:

'There is no need for music to be 'understood' . . . it only needs to be listened to with the heart and soul. The musical conscience begets a spiritual activity. A gift of the heart and not of the reason, the musical conscience is always the child of love; it cannot subsist in a climate of indifference. The heart is redeemed by faith alone; all that is divinely beautiful in music has been created on the foundations of Christianity. Every attempt to link music with atheism has been a total failure. Music cannot exist apart from humanism; the music that does not create a spiritual dimension and bind human beings together is of no significance at all.'

We should not mistake these absolutes for the anathemas of a disgruntled reactionary. Arthur Lourié was born, of Jewish parentage, at St Petersburg in 1892. In the years preceding the 1914 war he belonged to the avant-garde of Russian musicians. He was the friend of poets like Alexander Blok and Anna Akhmatova – both of whom are quoted frequently in these pages. He reacted strongly against the academicism *en vogue* at the Conservatoire, and was for some years the ardent disciple of Busoni. Only the outbreak of war prevented him from following Busoni to Bologna for a period of intensive study. Unlike many composers and most executive musicians, Lourié was a man of wide culture. Pushkin and Mallarmé, no less than Glinka and Moussorgsky, were his inspiration. In 1915 he wrote his first religious compositions; and then, just as he was leaving for the front in 1917, the Revolution broke out. He played an active part in the Union of Artists, which included writers, painters and musicians, and busied himself with a project to reform the Conservatoire. It was not until 1921 that the regimentation of art by politics induced him to leave Russia, going first to Berlin and then, in 1923, to Paris.

He was accompanied by his wife, who was a Romanov. They formed a close friendship with the Maritains and Lourié was present, from time to time, at the Thomist gatherings at Meudon. Everything he writes has the clear imprint of the Angelic Doctor; but he remained an essentially Russian composer. During the six years before he left Russia – although like so many expatriates he has never really left it – he had composed, in the first flush of revolutionary optimism, a marching accompaniment to a text of Maiakowski. This was followed by eight settings to poems by Pushkin, and an Alphabet for children based on passages from Tolstoy; a cantata on a poem by Blok, and a Chant Funébre for his death in 1921. Impressionism was in the air, and the influence of Debussy was still paramount. But a contrary tendency was already at work with the return to Bach and the ecstatic rediscovery of Mozart. Lourié met Stravinsky in 1923, but their ways subsequently parted. Lourié will not allow that any music – not even Bach – is purely objective, and he dismisses Stravinsky's plea that musical interpretation should be

totally inexpressive as the nonsense that it manifestly is. Stravinsky's virtuosity in the mastery of many styles was a long step towards the mechanisation of music that Lourié deplures. This reduction of composition to technique was not made any better by claiming Bach as its godfather. 'Purity' in music, like 'purity' in painting, depends on the impulse that animates it, and here a fragment from the *Journal de Raïssa* could be quoted very much to Lourié's purpose: 'The poet, because he gives himself in some way or another, moves in a halo of love. A love which springs out of him like a bubbling force, with no specific object.' The last phrase gives its imprimatur to a considerable degree of abstraction; but the value of the abstraction is in direct relation to the creative force behind it.

On the 13 February 1930 Lourié's *Sonate Liturgique* was performed at one of the Concerts Straram. Among those present was Guy de Chaunac – better known as Dom Robert, whose tapestry hangs above the high altar of Notre Dame de France off Leicester Square. He was overwhelmed by the beauty of the music and for the first time became aware of a vocation to the religious life. On the 10 April 1934 Lourié played over to the Maritains the score of his opera *Le Festin pendant la Peste*. This again was based on Pushkin, and indeed the title might be taken as Lourié's definition of the rôle of good music in a naughty world. Lourié describes how the opera was composed

'When I was at work on the *Festin pendant la Peste*, I had no programme in front of me. I was thinking neither of the psychological content of the story, nor of its morbid or catastrophic aspects. I was thinking about the "dying of a rose"; the dying of the canon of divine beauty. The theme of the death of a rose was a theme of my childhood, and it was always dear to me. A cyclic chant composed to some verses by Pushkin – where his subject was the rose – was one of my earliest works.'

Raïssa Maritain made this comment on the audition in her *Journal*: 'I find it intensely human and at the same time absolutely detached. It is one of those very rare works in which art and truth, liberty and perfection, lightness and gravity, are fused in the unity of a pure object.' Here the reference to *légèreté* is very much to the point; Lourié had amused himself (and others) by writing compositions in honour of Dunhill pipes and Upmann cigars! The *Festin* has never been performed on the stage, but the score was played, under Koussevitzky's direction, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1944.

Lourié's greatest public success was the performance of his *Concerto Spirituel* at the Salle Pleyel, under Charles Münch, in 1936. It was an exacting work, and its interpretation was only made possible by the Association des Amis du Chant Choral. Among these were Marc Chagall, Alfred Cortot, Charles Du Bos, Henri Ghéon, Serge Koussevitzky and Gabriel Marcel. François Mauriac was the titular

President and Raissa Maritain the moving spirit. Toscanini attended the concert, which was even patronised by an emissary of the B.B.C. Two years later the *Symphonie Dialectique* was given at Lyon under Witkowsky and in Paris under Münch. Raissa Maritain wrote to Lourié after a second hearing of the score:

'I am overjoyed to have heard your symphony once again. I don't think that Münch rendered the grandeur of the *adagio* so well as Witkowsky but, even as it was, this audition was a delight to the soul in every way. Listening to it on this occasion filled me with a deep peace. I remember that at Lyon I was shaken with emotion, worried how the work would be performed; and although I was reassured from the start, the emotion persisted. Yesterday the music flowed into me, and over me, like the rays of the sun and the noise of the sea. I'm not talking about the music, as such, you understand; I shouldn't venture to do that; I only want to tell you my impressions. It seemed to me, then, that all this music with its pure and fresh sonority, and with no descriptive or emotional intention, was like the sunrise over the sea, with the caressing light and the sweet, mysterious murmur of the waves ebbing to and fro. Everything was in movement; the earth come to life; everything came to life, far and near. A crowd of living creatures populated the space of sound, from which no escape was possible. One heard a rapid and exquisite dialogue, and life stirred in the human heart, coming from the distant past, with its own chant, outlined, abandoned, and then taken up again. The fragility, delicacy, and then the full religious gravity of it all, were overwhelming. A whole world was in motion from your heart to ours, advancing towards us like the day from one dawn to another.'²

In 1946 Arthur Lourié left Paris for New York, where the Maritains had preceded them a few months earlier. It was here that Koussevitzky, still in command at Boston, persuaded him to undertake *Le Maure de Pierre le Grand* – his 'Blackamoor', as Lourié liked to call it; and in November 1939 Koussevitzky had conducted his second Symphony (the *Korntchia*) with the Boston Symphony. Various religious works followed – notably a Motet on St Thomas' *De ordine Angelorum* and a *Postcommunion* on a text of Raissa Maritain. Lourié does not believe that the functions of poetry and music should be confused, but being sensitive to both he maintains that each can illuminate the other. When I met him at Princeton three years ago, he was drawn towards Eliot's *Four Quartets* and even suggested that we might collaborate over this. It was a suggestion that I should be very proud to see put into effect.

It may well surprise us that a composer who has won the admiration of Koussevitzky and Münch should yet remain so isolated from

²*Journal de Raissa* p. 250.

contemporary musical thought and idiom. I have shown that he has other thoughts and a very different idiom. Julien Green describes his work as 'grave jusqu'à une sorte d'austérité, mais belle comme la nuit et la solitude'. He stands in relation to his time as a figurative artist stands to fashionable abstraction. It is not in the least that Lourié is opposed to innovation; he discusses Schoenberg with understanding and Bartok with sympathy. But it was Bartok's final phase that appealed to him:

'In the works of his last period a new and lyrical voice began to be heard. This voice was trying to reach across the heap of dissonance and aggressive sound which were Bartok's tribute to modernism. The lyrical passages in his *Concerto for Orchestra*, and the *lento* of his last work, the *Sonata for Violin*, testify to this new voice. It is a voice which might well, in its lyricism, summon up the picture of a charming young girl, deaf and dumb, who speaks to us of her fate with gestures, and bitterly complains of it.'

What Lourié has always been looking for and trying, evidently, to express in his own compositions, is the poetic impulse. Maritain recognized it in the *Symphonie Dialectique*, as Lourié himself recognized it in the last of Bartok. In either case the impression produced by the music was expressed in a visual image. This was natural enough in a composer who, again and again, took poetry as his starting point and looked to opera, where all the arts are in alliance, for his largest opportunity. The purpose of music, he would say, is neither immediately descriptive nor directly emotional; it must rigorously exclude elements foreign to itself; but it must have a basic content of thought and feeling if it is not to remain a futile exercise. Both the poet and the musician, he says, are in search of the same thing, but they are looking for it on the separate planes of their art. The concrete world of art – which is the incarnation of form – demands the supreme liberty which in the one case is called 'poetry' and in the other 'music'. This definition of form is worth underlining, since it cuts the ground from under the feet of a sterile classicism; form is the shape of the thing to be expressed rather than the shape of its expression. How then should music find an escape from its present impasse? Here Lourié makes a distinction between 'phenomenal' experience and 'noumenal' knowledge. The first must be overcome in order to attain the second, and it will be for music to open the way.

'It is on this ground that the battle will be fought for new realisations. This is the point of departure for the music of the future, and not some abstract aesthetic formula.'

If this is true, then it is not Lourié but the musical mechanics who are living in an ivory tower – or a ferro-concrete laboratory. In any event I do not think Lourié is as isolated as he, or his admirers, may suppose. At the time he was living in Paris the French could not envisage the possibility of a contemporary English composer. Now,

the situation has changed. The outlook of a Britten, a Berkeley or a Tippett does not seem to me to differ materially from Lourié's, however different their personality or various their idiom. Moreover Lourié, like so many Russian exiles – and notably Berdiaeff, whom he must have known – has a charity towards the Revolution whatever they may think of its deviations. They see beyond it to a messianic vocation of universal brotherhood, of which they believe Russia to be the destined standard-bearer. Lourié seems even to imagine a kind of theocratic socialism. It was not communism but commerce which created the ugliness and vulgarity that he condemned at La Tourette. Its ravages in America have been insulting his eyes and ears for 25 years; and against these neither California – oh, certainly not California – nor even Princeton are an adequate protection.

Rejecting, therefore, the purely demoniac inspiration of so much in modern art, as well as its mechanical contrivance, Lourié was forced to come to grips with art that is commonly known as popular. In English terms he was forced to come to grips with Miss Joan Littlewood and 'happenings' at the Albert Hall. Here he makes a lapidary distinction between art that is popular, art that is proletarian, and art that is 'populiste'. The first is created by the people themselves; it is the expression of their genius and vigour. I can well imagine Lourié applauding Dan Leno or Marie Lloyd. Popular art, he reminds us, has always existed where there is a genuine national culture. Proletarian art, on the contrary, is a Marxist invention designed for the propagation of Marxist dogma. It was to be the work of men, emancipated from the past, liberated psychologically from the art of the bourgeois centuries. Lourié believes this to be 'one of the great Utopias of the Russian revolution'; an abortive enterprise in spite of the professional and popular elements which have tried to bring it to fruition. 'Populiste' art is a compromise between bourgeois and proletarian ideas; instead of springing from the *people*, it is imposed on the *masses*, partly because it is thought to be good for them and partly because it is thought to be what they want. It is an effect of political expediency; and so we are brought back to Sir Maurice Bowra's judgment that Marxism – at least as it has shown itself in practice – is of its nature inimical to poetry; and to Blok's reply to Gogol that 'the collapse of humanism goes hand in hand with the loss of the spirit of music.'

Yes, it may be argued, but the starving and the suppressed cannot live by music and poetry alone. Leaving the question aside for the moment, Lourié will argue that they cannot live by anything but the word of God – and he illustrates brilliantly how this has been dispensed through the Protestant spirituality of Bach and the Catholic spirituality of Mozart. For these two, with Palestrina, remain for him the pillars of the Western musical tradition. In

discussing the relationship between music and Christianity his judgment is categorical:

‘Our musical conscience has developed entirely on the terrain of the European conscience. One can speak of a musical conscience in the full meaning of the word. Now the European conscience was formed within Christianity. For centuries the spirit of music has been nourished from exclusively Christian sources. If these springs are exhausted today, music will die in Europe; or else a musical conscience, organically quite new, will take its place, in no way dependent on Christianity. That is possible; but up to the present time, and notably during the recent crises of our civilisation, wherever there has been a break with Christianity, music has immediately and unfailingly collapsed.’

This is far from being a plea for ‘confessional’ music; on the contrary, Lourié realises that the association of art and religion may well prove mutually compromising. But music must be affirmative, or nothing; and this affirmation is perhaps the basis of its spirituality.

Spirituality is a word difficult to define for it has nothing, essentially, to do with dogma. Mozart – Lourié suggests – knew nothing of dogma and cared less; yet he remains, with Bach, the most purely spiritual of musicians. Spirituality is a climate of the mind. One recognized it in the poetry of Keats, Walter de la Mare and Jules Supervielle, in Rimbaud, Reverdy and Blok as one recognizes it today in the music of Britten and in the verses of the French Jesuit, Jean Mambrino. It is the very air one breathes in the poetry of Raissa Maritain, and we should discover it, I have no doubt, in the music of Arthur Lourié. Its secret lies in a unity of conscience; for if the conscience of the artist is divided – Lourié reminds us – ‘so that the man himself is one thing and the artist something else, and neither is responsible for the other, then there is no longer art but amusement and self-admiration.’ The divisions of the artist are not the divisions of conscience, but the tensions of suffering; for suffering and sacrifice are the price of salvation for the poet and the musician as they are for the rest of a painfully redeemed humanity – ‘in order’ wrote Alexander Blok ‘that the pale gleams of art may reflect the fatal fires of living.’