

A Year in Classical Music: 1926, vol. 4

One of the many, many important artists working in Paris during the '20s was the great Romanian musician George Enescu. Enescu was a great master. He was the greatest composer Romania ever produced. He was also one of the best violinists of his generation, and a fine pianist and conductor, as well. He counted amongst his violin students the young Yehudi Menuhin, who studied with Enescu in Paris for most of 1927, after the 10-year old prodigy's sensational debut concert there in February of that year.

In 1926, Enescu finished the piece that many consider to be his finest composition: the *Violin Sonata no. 3 in A minor*, "*In the Popular Romanian Style*." As one of the earlier pieces in Enescu's mature later style, the *Third Violin Sonata* lies mostly outside the bounds of post-Romantic tonality, which Enescu had by then largely abandoned. But he hadn't abandoned the Romantic language by adopting the styles and techniques of the German Modernists, of Schoenberg or Hindemith. In music there was an important difference between Eastern European Modernism and Western European Modernism. For Western composers, Modernism represented a break with Romantic nationalism. In Germany, in France, in England and Italy, folk traditions and national cultural identities had been very well served by the Romantic language, with its rich tonal harmonies, its duple and triple meters. But up until the 20th century these Germanic conventions had tended to prevent Eastern European cultures from expressing their own cultural identities in their fine art music. If Western musical roots were in Gregorian chant and waltzes, in pure, consonant harmonies and simple, symmetrical rhythms, then Eastern traditions of folk music and religious chant had since ancient times distinguished themselves in their embrace of dissonance and rhythmic asymmetry – precisely those qualities embraced as well by post-tonal musical Modernism. So Eastern composers such as Szymanowski, Janáček, and Bartók had found that by writing outside of the 19th century Germanic, Teutonic tradition, their own nationalistic interests were in fact better served. Enescu's *Third Violin Sonata* is a good example of this Eastern European nationalism, with its Gypsy melodies and dance rhythms and biting dissonant harmonies. And Enescu having been the masterful violinist that he was, the score demands all kinds of extended techniques and special effects from the performer. You'll find a good performance of Enescu's *Third Violin Sonata* to be a breathtaking, edge-of-your seat experience.

The recording to get is by the Romanian duo, violinist Sherban Lupu and pianist Valentin Gheorghiu, on the Electrecord label. I mentioned that the great American violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin was Enescu's student. Sherban Lupu was Menuhin's student, so he's directly descended from the composer, musically speaking. Lupu was born and raised in Romania, and today he's a professor at the University of Illinois. His performance of the Enescu sonata is fiery and powerful. Its Romanian and Gypsy nationalism are a native language to Lupu and Gheorghiu, so they it get exactly right where other interpreters can't entirely free their readings from contrivance and mannerism. And

besides the fantastic recording of the *Third Violin Sonata*, the double album is an all-Enescu recital that also includes his *Second Violin Sonata*, his *Romanian Caprice for Violin and Orchestra*, and his suite *Impressions d'Enfance*, or *Memories of Childhood*, for violin and piano. The only problem is that the Electrecord album can be hard to find. When I got my copy I had to order the CDs from a Romanian website – I used Google translator to fumble my way through the order, and I wasn't sure I done it right until the package arrived after a week or so. The album's been available at arkivmusic.com but they're out of stock as I write this. So if you aren't able to find the CDs for sale and if they're not available at any of the download websites, a good second option is the 1967 reading by Isaac Stern and Alexander Zakin, on volume 27 of the *Isaac Stern: A Life in Music* series. I hear touches of a mid-20th century American schmaltz in places, and it's a recording that favors the violin a little much, but it's passionate playing and I love how Stern handles the climactic passage of the second movement. After all, it was Stern who gave us that incredible reading of the Bartók *Second Violin Concerto* with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic; he knew what he was doing with Eastern European styles.

I've been most interested to get to know something of the history of Poland as I looked into the background to Karol Szymanowski's career. It's a history I'm ashamed to say I had known next to nothing up until now. From the Polish perspective, World War II ended not in 1945 but in 1989, with the overthrow of the communist regime there. And in a sense, from Poland's perspective the war had begun not in 1938 with the Nazi invasion, but as far back as the late 1700's. In 1926 the First World War was a very recent memory. Poland had lost even more lives than Great Britain in the First World War; but it had also regained its independence and was free from foreign rule for the first time since 1772, when its territory had been partitioned by Russia, Austria, and Prussia. At the outset of the First World War, Polish men had been conscripted into the German Army, the Austro-Hungarian Army, and the Russian Army, forced to fight and kill each other over a dispute between the very states that had forcibly occupied their nation for nearly a century and a half. By 1918, though, Poland had seen the defeat or withdrawal of all three occupying powers, and at last regained its sovereignty.

Polish nationalism had flourished during the century and a half of partition and occupation, and as you're probably aware Polish national music culture during the years of partition had produced Frédéric Chopin, whose rise to prominence had come at around 1830. But by the later 1800's the three occupying powers had begun to suppress Poland's distinctive national style in the arts more forcibly. Cultural institutions were imported and upheld by the foreign powers, in an effort to prevent indigenous Polish cultural institutions from flourishing. In 1832 Russian authorities, as part of their efforts to prevent the consolidation of Polish culture and the national uprisings such consolidation would tend to encourage, had closed the Warsaw Conservatory. There was not a Polish-run professional orchestra in the country until 1901. Furthermore, throughout the 1800's repressive taxation and economic restrictions by

Poland's foreign rulers had largely prevented the rise of a *bourgeois* middle class – the social class within which classical music thrived in the Romantic era.

Independent at last after World War I, then, after almost 150 years of occupation, Poles were free to begin developing indigenous artistic expressions of their culture. Its most sophisticated expression in art music came with the compositions of Karol Szymanowski – especially by 1924, and the full development of his later style. In 1926 he completed his setting of a Polish translation of the *Stabat Mater*, the medieval Roman Catholic hymn that describes the suffering of Mary as she beholds her crucified Son. The text depicts the Virgin's suffering in its first passages, and then in the later passages, the penitents ask that they might share in her grief, as an aid to repentance and the worldly detachment of the spiritual life. For Szymanowski, who was not a religious man, the hymn served as an allegory for human suffering generally, and for that of Poland specifically. The recording you'll want to hear of Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater* is by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle. It's part of EMI's Great Recordings of the Century series, and it belongs in that collection without question. Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater* would be high in running on almost anyone's list of the greatest works of classical music produced in the first half of the 20th century, and most critics find Rattle's reading of it to be the definitive interpretation.

Next in Szymanowski's catalog from 1926 are his *Four Polish Dances*, for solo piano. You're probably familiar with the dance forms Szymanowski used in these pieces from Chopin's music: a mazurka, a krakowiak, an oberek, and a polonaise. Chopin's treatment of these forms had been advanced in its day, sometimes radically advanced. His harmonies in some passages were so avant-garde, so far ahead of their time that Mendelssohn, reviewing a set of Chopin's mazurkas, said they were "so mannered, they were difficult to understand." But even if it was an advanced Romanticism, Chopin had always written within the bounds of the Romantic language; with Szymanowski's treatment of these dance forms, you'll hear them fully adapted to a Modernist aesthetic. Get a copy of Marc-André Hamelin's 2002 recording of the *Four Polish Dances*, which comes on his album *Szymanowski: The Complete Mazurkas*. It includes the mazurkas op. 20 and op. 62, as well as a *Valse Romantique* from 1925. You'll be delighted to listen to Hamelin's album alongside a good collection of Chopin's mazurkas, to compare and contrast the Romantic language to the Modernist; try Rubinstein's set from the 1960's.

Szymanowski composed art song in Polish, but also in German, in French, and in English. In 1926 he wrote a cycle of seven songs to English poems by the Irish Modernist James Joyce. The poems come from Joyce's collection called *Chamber Music*, published in 1907. Joyce had written the poems with a lyrical quality so that they'd be suitable for musical settings; besides Karol Szymanowski, Samuel Barber and Luciano Berio, among others, have set these poems to music. Like his mazurkas, Szymanowski's finely crafted Joyce songs are concise expressions of his Modernist outlook, as he expressed it in the third

and final phase of his career. You can find them performed by soprano Juliana Gondek and pianist Reinild Mees, on the Channel Classics label's complete set of Szymanowski's songs.

You probably have a general sense for German history between the World Wars. It's the story of a broken economy, hyperinflation and suffocating war reparations payments, violent political extremism on both the Left and the Right, and a humiliated society that had lost two and a half million of its people to the first war. It was against this backdrop that Adolph Hitler in 1926 published the second of the two volumes of his manifesto *Mein Kampf*. He also convened the Bamberg Conference that year, at which he united disparate factions within the Nazi Party and consolidated his control over it by introducing his dictatorial "Führer principle."

But from 1923 until 1929 – the years Gustav Stresemann served first as chancellor and then as foreign minister of the Weimar Republic – Germans enjoyed a period of relative economic stability and cultural revival. Stresemann and his government improved relations with Germany's neighbors and former enemies to the point that the Weimar Republic was admitted to the League of Nations in '26, and Stresemann was awarded the 1926 Nobel Peace Prize together with French foreign minister Aristide Briand. In America we called the decade "The Roaring Twenties." Germans called theirs "The Golden Twenties."

In the first year of Germany's Golden Twenties, 1923, composer Paul Hindemith had begun to serve as an organizer of the Donaueschingen new music festival. Donaueschingen means "springs of the Danube." The small southwest German town was built around the confluence of the great river's headwaters in the Black Forest. Every October at Donaueschingen, the oldest contemporary music festival in the world is held. Today it's still one of the most prestigious. If you're a classical music fan you'll recognize the names of Ferruccio Busoni and Richard Strauss; they had been two of the founders of the Donaueschingen festival in 1921. To get back to Hindemith, during the '20s he'd noticed that composers of the day tended to neglect wind bands, and so at the 1926 Donaueschingen festival he devoted an entire concert to newly commissioned works for wind band.

Hindemith's contribution to the concert was his *Concert Music for Wind Orchestra*. It's interesting music: on the surface it generally seems bright and upbeat like so much of the music wind bands play, but just beneath the surface it's volatile and off-balance in a way that's a little disquieting. The second movement, "Six Variations on the Song *Prince Eugene, the Noble Night*," is the weightiest and most substantive part of the piece. I think of the first and third movement as a prelude and postlude to it. Look for the recording of Hindemith's *Concert Music for Wind Orchestra* on the album by the Eastman Wind Ensemble under Donald Hunsberger. Besides the Hindemith, the rest of the album is a varied and interesting program of Modernism for wind band, ranging from charming and inviting works by Vaughan Williams and Copland to the more aggressive abstractions you hear in Hindemith and in Husa's *Music for*

Prague, which many band directors I've known name as one of the most difficult work ever composed for band. Trumpet soloist Wynton Marsalis makes a cameo appearance on the album, in Copland's *Quiet City*.

Now, I mentioned that Hindemith wrote his *Concert Music* for the 1926 Donaueschingen festival. For all you band jocks out there, there's another album you can get if you want to hear more of the music composed for that concert. Besides the Hindemith, it contains Ernst Toch's *Spiel* for wind band, which we covered on the previous episode of the show. There are also wind band pieces by Pepping and Krenek, and there's a good performance of Hindemith's *Clarinet Sonata* on it. The band pieces are performed by the Furman Civic Wind Ensemble. They don't play nearly as well as the Eastman Wind Ensemble, but still they offer an enjoyable performance and it's interesting repertoire, an interesting historical document.

Hindemith's major work in 1926 was his opera *Cardillac*. Let's start with a recommended recording. I'll point you to the 1968 performance by the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra featuring the great baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau in the title role. In the album's booklet essay, critic and librettist Paul Griffiths discusses how *Cardillac* was Hindemith's response to "the problem of modern opera," and it's not hard to guess what this problem was: how could a composer use atonal music to achieve the dramatic and emotional effects that had always been the whole point of composing opera? The idea had always been to express, through music, the emotions that the characters experience as the plot develops. But the Modernist revolution in music had been a reaction against the emotionalism of the Romantic style that had defined European music through the 1800's, and if you've listened to even a little atonal Modernist music, I'm sure it hasn't been lost on you that the expression of emotions in any of the familiar, traditional ways has very little to do with it. So what could opera composers in the 1920's do with this problem? The aesthetic goals of their compositional techniques contradicted everything that opera had always been about. Well, with *Cardillac*, Hindemith didn't even try to solve the problem. Instead he simply acknowledged it, by writing music that's independent of the plot and the drama, even unrelated to them.

As for the story, *Cardillac* offers you a terrifying, demonic operatic villain. *Cardillac* is the name of the lead role. He's a goldsmith who has to sell his work to support himself, but he's so obsessed with his own artistry and the beauty of his creations that he tracks down all his customers, murders them, and reclaims whatever they bought from him. The story is based on E.T.A. Hoffman's 1819 short story, *Mademoiselle de Scudéri*. Griffiths draws a parallel between *Cardillac* stealing back his gold pieces and Hindemith stealing his music back from the audience in this opera. He keeps the music for himself and for his own interests as a craftsman instead of giving it over to the audience, for the sake of their emotional experience of the drama. Be sure your copy of *Cardillac* includes Griffith's essay, which is an excellent piece of writing about music.

Maybe it's because I've always been an instrumentalist first, but Hindemith's separation of stage drama and music doesn't present much of a problem for me. Griffiths points to the similarity between *Cardillac* and Bach's Passion settings, with their concern for contrapuntal forms: canons, fugues, passacaglias, and so forth. I don't have any problem following the stage drama and superimposing it in my mind over the music I'm hearing, especially when it's music of this quality. *Cardillac* is gorgeously scored, with an emphasis on the winds and brass. It has a rugged beauty all on its own, so that you could just as well listen to it apart from the story, the same way you'd listen to a long symphony. But I'd be interest to hear from opera connoisseurs about this. If opera has always been your first interest in classical music, do you enjoy *Cardillac*, or does it completely miss the point of opera? Do I completely miss the point? Let us know in the comments section for this episode at ayicm.com.