

SERGE KOUSSEVITZKY

Biographical Notes.-

Mr. SERGE KOUSSEVITZKY was born in Tver (in the north of Russia) in 1874, and early gave promise of an exceptional musical development. At the age of 12 he began to conduct a provincial theatre orchestra and to compose music for dramatic representations. Two years later he entered the Conservatoire of the Moscow Philharmonic Society as a student of composition and orchestral conducting, and in order to qualify for a scholarship, studied also the double-bass under the famous double-bass player Prof. Rambaussec. On the termination of his studies, he obtained the post of double-bass soloist at the Moscow Imperial Opera, and during a period of several years appeared in all the principal centers as a double-bass virtuoso. He never lost sight, however, of his real aim, and in 1909, after an intensive study of the interpretation of the best classical and modern music as conductor of an orchestra organised by him in Berlin from the students of the Berlin high school of Music, he returned to Russia and established his own Symphony orchestra in Moscow, organising and conducting a series of symphony concerts in Moscow and Petrograd. In course of time he made several tours with his orchestra through the Russian provinces and was the first to make familiar in Russia many of the compositions of modern European composers such names as Debussy, Ravel, Florent Schmitt, P. Dukas, Roger Ducasse, Fanelly, Elgar, R. Strauss, and Russians - Scriabine, Strawinsky, Prokofieff and others.

Mr. Koussevitzky was in the habit of making a bi-annual tour of the central provinces of his native country specially chartering one of the largest Volga steamers and using the 2,325 miles extent of the river as a highway. By this means he was able to transport with ease and celerity a large party of friends as well as his permanent private orchestra of 85 musicians with all the necessary impedimenta, including a full-size concert grand piano, giving almost gratuitously from time to time a series of high class concerts at the principal places on the banks of the stream and immediate neighbourhood, thus bringing a breath of the civilised world to the teeming multitudes of that region, which covers, roughly 563,000 square miles. In the course of his unio crusades Mr. Koussevitzky came across many instances of latent talent, that might otherwise have lain fallow. The last occasion on which he was permitted to make his musical tour on Volga was in May 1914, the company of the guests and musicians totalling over 100 persons and the itinerary embraced the principal towns of the Volga

River from Jaroslavl to Astrakhan. The programmes included examples of all the European masters, and the playing of the famous French pianist, Mr. Eduard Rislér added greatly to the éclat of the concerts and the compleatness of the scheme.

During the war and the first period of the Russian revolution Mr. Koussevitzky remained in Russia and continued his musical activities, and after the first revolution (1917) he was appointed by the provisional Russian government as General Conductor of the Russian State Orchestra (former Court Orchestra). He left Russia in 1920 and from that time he renewed his artistic activity in Europe.

Characteristic of his musical activity in Russia.-

Mr. Koussevitzky gave usually every season in Russia a serie of symphony concerts in Petrograd and Moscow with best European and Russian soloists and sometimes with the most reputed European conductors who were engaged now and then as specialists for conducting certain works.

The base of the organisation of Mr. Koussevitzky's own orchestra in Russia was practically the same as that of the best American orchestras: his musicians chosen by competition of the best Russian orchestra players were engaged at least for a term of one year and had no right to participate in any other concerts or musical organisations. For the interpretation of choral works Mr. Koussevitzky organised in Moscow a mixed chorus of 250 singers and for the performance of the same works at Petrograd he usually engaged the famous Russian chorus of Arkhangelsky.

The season of concerts in Moscow and Petrograd was usually ended before easter and in the course of the spring seasons Mr. Koussevitzky used to organise in the two capitals of Russia special festivals of Beethoven, Bach, Tschaikevsky, Rimsky-Korsakow and others, conducted by himself.

The principal aim of all the musical organisation and activity of Mr. Koussevitzky in Russia as well as the aim of his concerts was to make familiar in Russia the music of European and Russian modern composers and on the other hand to struggle against the routine in the understanding and interpretation of the classical music. So Mr. Koussevitzky was the first to make known in Russia nearly all the principal works of Debussy and that greatest French composer was twice invited by him to come to Russia and to conduct his works in Petrograd and in Moscow. Many of the scores of Debussy in the library of Mr. Koussevitzky have personal hand remarks of Debussy.

The great friendship which united Mr. Koussevitzky to composer Alexander Scriabine is well known. The composer himself estimated Mr. Koussevitzky as the best interpreter of his orchestral works and he was the first to perform in Russia his poem "Prometheus" (Poem of Fire) and the famous "Poeme de l'Extase" which had practically no success after its first performance owes its great popularity to the performances at the concerts of Mr. Koussevitzky where it gave the greatest triumphs to the conductor.

Musical Edition.-

The Musical publication "L'Edition Russe de Musique" organised by Mr. Koussevitzky and his wife Mrs Nataly Koussevitzky in 1909 simultaneously with his concerts, had as its principal aim the publishing of the works of young Russian composers who could not easily find publishers in spite of their great talent and also their defence from the exploitation "Edition Musicale Russe" published all the most important works of such Russian composers as Igor Strawinsky, Serge Rachmaninoff, Alexander Scriabine Serge Prokofieff, Alexander Gretchaninoff and others. The famous Rimsky-Korsakow's "Treaty of Orchestration" known by the musicians throughout the world, was published also by the same Edition. It pursues its activity now in Paris.

Activity in Europe.-

Mr. Koussevitzky came to Europe in 1920 and organised in Paris his concerts with the same aim as in Russia. He formed his orchestra with the best elements of different Parisian orchestras and give each year two series of concerts (four concerts in each series) in autumn and spring and those concerts acquired since their existence a leading feature of musical life of Paris, owing to the freshness and novelty of their programmes and the new spirit which inspires them. During the four seasons of their existence Mr. Koussevitzky discovered to his audiences not only many works of Russian composers quite unknown in Europe before him, but also those of the young composers of the modern French, English and Italian schools, and even some of quite unfamiliar classical and ancient works.

During the mentioned period Mr. Koussevitzky gave in Paris the first performance of the following works:

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| DEBUSSY | "Sarabande" scored by M. Ravel |
| " | "Danse" " " " |
| ROLAND-MANIEL | "Isabelle et Pantalon" overture |
| " | Three movements of Scarlatti |

Florent SCHMITT	"Rêves"
" "	Mirages, Suite p. orchestre
Darius MILHAUD	2° Suite de Prothée
HONEGGER Arthur	"The Victorious Horace"
" "	Chant de Joie
" "	"Pacific 231"
Maurice RAVEL	Paintings from the picture Show by Moussorgsky, scored by Ravel
" "	Alborada del Gracioso
Alberic MAGNARD	4th Symphony
ARNOLD BAX	The Garden of Fand
W. REED	The will of the Whisp
HOLBROOKE	Bronwen Overture
Fr. MALIPIERO	Pause del Silenzio
" "	Impressioni dal Vero (3d suite)
O. RESPIGHI	Antiche Danze ed Arie
" "	Concerto Gregoriano for Violin & Orchestra
A. TANSMAN	Scherzo Symphonique
" "	Legende
M. DELAGE	Overture for a Ballet de l'Avenir
" "	Three Poems for Voice and Orchestra
A. ROUSSEL	Symphony Op. 23
A. GRETCHANINOFF	A Liturgy of St. John Chrysostome
MOUSSORGSKY	Two scenes with soloists and Chorus from the Opera "Khovantchina"
BORODINE	Two acts from the Opera "Prince Igor" (with chorus and soloists)
MOUSSORGSKY	"La Défaite de Sennakheribe" Cantate f. Chorus & Orchestra
KASTALSKY	Fraternal Commemoration (with chorus)
LIADOFF	"KIKIMORA"
" "	From the Apocalypsis
RACHMANINOFF	The Island of Death
" "	3d Concerto for Piano & Orchestra
Rimsky-Korsakow	The Battle of Kejenietz
" "	The Flight of the Bumble-bee
" "	Suite from the opera "Tzar Saltan"
PROKOFIEFF	Symphonie Classique
" "	2d Concerto for piano & Orchestra
" "	3d Concerto f. piano & Orchestra
" "	1st Concerto for Violin & Orchestra
" "	Suite Scythe
" "	Suite from the Opera "Love of three Oranges"
" "	Sept ils sont Sept!" For chorus & orchestra
SCRIABINE	Poem de l'Extase
" "	Poem of Fire (Prometheus)
STRAVINSKY	Octur for wind Instruments
" "	Wind instruments Symphony (in London)
" "	Concerto for piano and wind instruments orchestra
" "	Chant du Rossignol - a Symphonic Poem

Ph. Em. BACH	Concerto scored by N. Streinberg
VIVALDI	Concerto scored by A. Gilotti
RIEGEL D.	Symphony in C. major
BOCCHERINI	Symphony in C.
STAMITZ	Concerto for strings
POLACI	Symphony in C. minor
LOCATELLI	A Funeral Symphony
CORBILLY	Concerto for Orchestra N. 3
SCHUBERT	5th Symphony
BRANIS	Schicksalslied (with chorus)
HUGO WOLF	Der Feuerreiter (with chorus)
MANUEL DE FALLA	El Amor Brujo
Lily BOULANGER	Poeme Bouddhique
	etc... etc....

During the same years in Europe Mr. Koussevitzky conducted concerts in London (London Symphony subscription concerts) Manchester, Liverpool (Philharmonic Society), Glasgow (Scottish Orchestra) Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dunfermline, Barcelona, Madrid, Rome, Berlin, Warsaw, Nantes, etc.

He has conducted also Russian Operas at Barcelona, Lisbon, and Paris (Grand Opera). Under his conductorship have been given in those cities the following Russian Operas: Rimsky-Korsakov - The Snow maiden; Moussorgsky - Boris Godunov; Moussorgsky - Khovantchina; Borodine - Prince Igor; Tchaikovsky - The Dame of Spades".

Some characteristics of his conducting,-

1) by Wortham (Morning Post)

Queen's Hall at 8 O'cl. For once in a way the stalls and great circle are the best filled parts of the house. That tightly wedged ring of humanity in the upper circle which usually marks a "gala night" is absent. The many are not interested in conductors. The pianist is their god. All sorts of distinguished persons below make up for the public's apathy. Three four famous conductors many composers, and virtuosi season. The orchestra are in their seats. ... minute clapses in which latecomers wrestle with refractory coats and tread on your toes without so much as a word of apology. Then you are aware that a man of a middle hight and age with a deliberate and slightly stooping walk, is making his way past the desks of the first violins to the conductors platform. He mounts it leisurely and acknowledges with grave bows the plaudits of the audience and orchestra. You notice the strongly marked features, the straight hair of the Slave, now turning slightly grey, the well knit - but unathletic figure. A sedate and reserved man, you would say, with

nothing in his dress or appearance except, perhaps, the expression about the eyes, which businessmen don't have, to show the artist and the musician. The cheering ceases. He looks round the orchestra, then lifts slowly up his stick, lightly posed between his forefinger and thumb. Some conductors, like speakers, who clear their throats to give themselves courage, rap their desk. Koussevitzky seems to think this too much trouble. At this moment of silence, when he is ready to loose more thunders than Jove were had in his armoury, he stands without any attitude to indicate the fires that are ready to burst forth. Then suddenly the transformation comes as he plunges into the seething unrest of Tchaikowsky's Francesca da Rimini. The real Koussevitzky has emerged from his corporeal case, and become an elemental force inspiring the will of everyone of the hundred or so musicians who are known collectively as the London Symphony Orchestra. Or rather he stands there, the incarnation of forceful energy, urging, driving, encouraging, and arguing with every muscle of his body and every line of his face. His gestures are extraordinary. At one moment he will lift his upturned palms in a pose that is hellenic in everything except its passion, at another with a sweeping movement of the shoulders he will raise his arms high above his head for some great climax. Not that he is all Sturm und Drang. But even when flute and clarinette are engaged in some tranquil conversation, and the rest of the orchestra is acting up to the precept that "scul le silence est grand", that concentrated strength of will which has raised Koussevitzky, to the highest eminence amongst the conductors of the world, is always there...

"Le Temps" (14-)88-1921) by Mr. Th. Lindenlaub.

... At the conductor's desk, he reveals himself astonishingly supple: one should say a Prometheus. His intelligence is subtle and marks in him the gift of thinking in an artist's way with the musician the most removed from his own nature. But he is quite himself and gives his most intense and striking effects especially with romantic musicians, the extremes, the intoxicated with sounds, the visionaries. He belongs to their family. He feels them with all the depths of his nature. Their blood and their frenzy penetrates him. He is the accumulator of their fluids and he sends them back with a prodigious intensity to his orchestra and audience. His ideal is - it seems - is to bring his public to a state of transport which is so exactly characterised by the ancient famous expression on the Bacchus mystery: I ate of the tambour and drunk of the cymbals."....

"France" - 16 - v - 1925

Amongst the many conductors who illustrate our time Mr. Koussevitzky occupies a preponderant place; he unites all the essential qualities necessary to a man who

conducts a group of instrumentists. He is a profound musician as well by instinct as by study; his gestures are clear, expressive and authoritative - the direct emanation of his thoughts; thanks to his mimics - all that is the most communicable in a personal emotion - is transferred from him first to his musicians then to his audience."...

"Le Monde Musical" May 1923 (by Edouard Schneider)

"The body strained, the posture sculpturing in space the vibrato of the orchestral soul, the glance prompt forcing the eye of the performer like a torch pouring flames, the impatient foot beating with a nervous force an imperial cadence, the first thrown forward shaking the mass of braces carrying forth by a magic chain the world of the instrumentists, the opened hand falling down in a planning flight, the voluntary face bowed on the unbridled storm, suddenly receiving a bright sheaf of the ocean of sounds, like an innumerable wave, dominator like a chief of a battle - beautiful like a palpitating image of Apollo - Mr. Koussevitzky reappears to us more than ever animator, master of his beautiful talent, with as much zeal towards the new works as towards the old masters."....

"Westminster Gazette" 4 - VI - 1921.

It is used to be said that Nikish mesmerised his players. In Koussevitzky's case one might rather put it that he electrifies them - and with them the audiences too. Certainly no one who was present is likely to forget very soon his amazingly vivid and forceful reading of Scriabin's extraordinary work last night. He did astonishing things earlier too in Stravinsky's "Petrouchka" and "From the Apocalypse" of Liadoff...."

The French opinion about his nomination to Boston.-

"Mr. Koussevitzky has been nominated as conductor to the Boston Symphony to replace Mr. Pierre Monteux. It is known that the conductors to the Boston Symphony are usually selected amongst the elite of the international musicians, we could not have hoped that after Mr. Pierre Monteux would again be chosen a French conductor; and so we must rejoice to see Mr. Koussevitzky occupy a situation which is worth him and where we hope he will continue to support the French music as he always did."

("France" 0-X-1923)

"It seems that Mr. Koussevitzky has been nominated to replace Mr. Monteux at the Boston Symphony in a very short time. That is a very annoying news. It is not likely that our Societies are still on the eve of throwing down their somnolence, and it is most probable that that the 30

important place which Mr. Koussevitzky occupied in the musical life of Paris will remain empty.

("Europe Nouvelle" 17-XI-1925)

"At the beginning of the concert the public cheered Mr. Koussevitzky with long ovations; it was not only to congratulate him on occasion of the nomination by which the United States only ratified once more the most incontestable judgement of the publics of Europe; it was also to express their firm wishes that the two annual groups of concerts given by him would not be stopped by that nomination."

("Menestrel" - 19-X-1925)

"Nominated as conductor to the famous Boston Symphony, Mr. Koussevitzky will leave next summer for United States. Our best wishes may accompany that eminent musician without any melancholy: we already know that we will see him every year in Paris in spite of his new functions. We know also that he will not take with him overseas many parcels of goods, but the flower of the music of today and in particular of the French music, which did not know many gardeners of his quality.

("L'Eclair" November 1925,
Roland-Manuel)

Repertoire of Mr. Koussevitzky consists of all the classics and modern composers. He says: I like very sort of music which is really good. Helas his own view on classics and his conception of classical works in many respects differs from that of a traditional interpretation of them. His view on classics is expressed with an extraordinary clearness and exactitude in two articles of the distinguished English writer Ernest Newman. "The Filament and the Current" on occasion of his performance of the Beethoven's Choral Symphony" (here attached)

New works for America.-

Mr. Koussevitzky brings with him to America many works which have never been performed before in the United States. Some of those works are even manuscripts. One of them - the famous orchestration of the "Paintings from a Picture show" of Moussorgsky made especially for Mr. Koussevitzky by Ravel. He has several classical works which are also practically unknown.

THE ART OF CONDUCTING, AS SEEN BY MR. KOUSSEVITZKY.-

"To my opinion - said Mr. Koussevitzky in 1921 to a representative of the paper "Comœdia" - the problem which stands before a conductor, cannot be considered as a purely technical problem. As genial as it may be, the work of the composer, will remain a "dead letter" if not animated by the artist.

Consequently, the artist-interpreter should not be but the blind interpreter of the composer's intentions, the (interpretation) reading of the musical work being in itself a creative act, and every creative act is always personal. To be a real artist, an interpreter must possess a creative power; without it there would be no difference between him and an ordinary skilled musician. But the aim of a conductor must be deeper and greater, because, if his creative power is real, inspired, and persuasive, he can really start a new era in the tastes and the musical comprehension of his time.

The influence in the past century of such great conductors as Berlioz, Hans Bulow and Wagner sows it well. Such is the social task of a conductor, a great and attractive task but at the same time full of responsibility.

In the action of his technical work has to pass through enormous difficulties. Is it right to think that he is only an executant playing the orchestra as one plays an instrument? If that was the case, that instrument would be a dead instrument, able to give only a rigid and dry reading of music. To make his work really fertile he must know to animate his orchestra, communicating it his inspiration, wake the artist in each musician, be his rôle ever so humble, and to make him conscious of the personal responsibility, which he must bear in the artistic realisation of the musical work. He must be finally a true leader for his orchestra, inspiring his work and coordinate the lines guiding it to the unic final aim.

Now I return again to the question of reading. If the composer is not able to take part in the creative work of reading, the artist remains free in his reading of music, and the more persuasive is his creative power, the nearer he approaches his aim.

A sanction of decenniums has established certain traditions in the reading of classical music. And yet it is not rare that the established scholastic and academic traditions kill the immortal spirit of the works of Bach and Beethoven; thanks to what much of what is beautiful and immortal, begins to fade and to be forgotten. Every epoque in the history of art creates its own laws of interpretation and makes them more refined and perfect. If now one would think of playing Shakespeare or Molière as they have been played hundred or two hundred years ago, nobody would go to the theatre, and when occasionally we wish to restaure now

the ancient theatre in reconstituting its style, we adapt it to the contemporary manner, for a purely scientific reproduction of style would be from the artistic point of view deprived of life and inspiration. It is just the same with music. It is true that the traditions of reading of Bach and Beethoven have created by great artists of genius, but we follow them quite blindly, there would be no inspiration no persuasive power in our reading. We must know to blow new life in our reading, to put in the heroic spirit of our time our modern emotions. And then only it will be illuminated by a new and right spirit."

On the modern French music.-

"Some musicians speaking of the modern French music, insist upon the idea that the principal element on which it is based, is its subtle colour which does not know, in their opinion, luminous shades nor sharp lines. I know that this side of the French music can charm and enchant, but personally I feel in it also some quite different things. I feel its powerful temperament moderated by a noble feeling of tact but at the same time full of beautiful vitality; I feel the strong audacity of the creative idea, which always aims to take its flight and makes extraordinary conquests in the domain of Art. And that is what attracts me most vigorously in it and makes me approach its performance with love."

Ninth Symphony.-

"Glasgow Herald" 21-3-1924 (Ernest Newman)

In one of the Continental centers where they take music seriously one could imagine, after Koussevitzky's performance, free fight in Queen's Hall and all down Langham Place between his partisans and those of Weingartner. No two readings of the same work could be more utterly dissimilar; and it was natural that some who were thrilled by one of them should feel cold or angry over the other. For the people who swear by some vague and perhaps mythical thing that they call (without being able to define it very rigorously) the classical tradition, Weingartner's reading was undoubtedly the ideal one. The other people, who do not care a rap for any tradition, classical or other, who believe that a great work is just what a great player can make it, and that there are as many Hamlets as there are actors of genius to play Hamlet, Koussevitzky's performance swept Weingartner's off the board; it had twice the fire and three times the colour. Personally I am in a happy condition of being able to think each of the two performances the finest conceivable of its type; and I have no fixed opinions as to which is the type. If I were asked which of them would have had Beethoven's approval I should say he would approved, in different moods, of both. But I think some of

the parts of Koussevitzky's performance would have astonished him... It was emphatically vitality that Koussevitzky put into every vein of the symphony. Occasionally one might think the vitality got rather out of hand, but in spite of these occasional touches of the convulsive the general effect was one of grandeur. For us of to-day Beethoven is a classic; and if you are satisfied that there is all to be said on the subject then you will plump for Weingartner. But if you remember Stendhal's dictum that every classic was a romantic in its day, if you remember that Beethoven saw himself not as a mellow hundred year old classic but as a man of flesh and blood, and very sensitive flesh and blood at that, you will feel that there is a good deal to be said for a reading of the symphony that makes it sound as if it had come straight and hot from some highly charged personality of today. This is what Koussevitzky did with it; and for my part I see no reason why he should not. Anyhow his reading created tremendous enthusiasm in an audience that may be presumed to have known the symphony well. Certainly no one who heard the scherzo on Monday will ever forget the vitality that Koussevitzky put into it; As for the choir, it was probably wondering next day how it managed to sing as it did. As a rule all those ladies and gentlemen are models of decorum. Koussevitzky made howling Dervishes of them for the moment....

"Daily Mail" (25-3-1924) by R.C.

Seldom had there been such an exciting evening at the Queen's Hall. After two hours of Serge Koussevitzky's conducting there last night, one felt pale and worn with the nervous tension. For the second time within five days the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven filled the hall. Weingartner's performance of it last week had been, like Hermione, "as continent, as chaste, as true". Last night the temperature rose. This Koussevitzky is a stupendous fellow. We well believe that Weingartner's classic feeling best harmonises with the elegant and somewhat disdainful attitude of our London Symphony Orchestra, so aloof from enthusiasm. But if Koussevitzky decided they shall go through a hedge backwards through a hedge backwards they go... He is not to be blamed for anything for he aims at the superhuman. Though he may fall away from it, it is wonderful enough that every now and then he should touch a superhuman degree of energy tenseness, and wild poetry... The concert broke all sorts of records - for one thing, the audience hoarded up all its applause to the end."

"Temps" June 24 1924 (Th. Lindenlaub.)

The four concerts given by Mr. Koussevitzky this spring, made their usual impression on the public which followed them passionately... The Russian conductor makes whatever he likes of the adventurous sensibilities of his public, but it would not be right to see in him a mere "maître magnétiseur", an illusionist of the baton. In whatever he does there is certainly something of illusion but surely he is the first to be taken by it. And how sincere and irresistible shines on his face the passion of the music which possesses him! Others can love it better; nobody loves it more than that Slave whom the rythm and sonority by themselves bring to a state of trance. And yet there is something of a greater importance in that "medium", than his extraordinary sensibility. The choice of certain musics of the past, his interpretation of them are such that no other conductor with a reputation of an accomplished musician, could do better or more correct. Nobody before him had the idea of presenting us the "Funeral Symphony" of Locatelli in memoriam of his wife, an accomplished model of musical elegy, one of those beautiful works without age with a face which no time can alter. And those who have heard Mr. Koussevitzky conducting the "Eroica" will never forget with what a sense of grandeur he leads it to its final apotheose. Yes, there is something quite different in that complicated artist than a priest celebrating black masses of music.

For example, he has a passion of courage. He has a superstition of novelties. He experiments on us arbitrary and desordonate music with a sort of mystic faith which makes him believe that finally something will come out of that chaos. One can be touched by that faith even without partaking it. Anyway, Koussevitzky will never tire of experimenting with us and on us. As soon as he feels a rythm he precipits himself in it and we follow him through everything. We come out of it milled and bleeding less happy than the Mazeppa of Hugo and Liszt who "falls down but gets up King".