

Rodolphe Mathieu: Parlons... musique (1932)

Parlons... musique (Let's Talk Music) by Rodolphe Mathieu (1890–1962) was published by Albert Lévesque in 1932. The fact is significant, for Lévesque, who started his literary publishing house in 1928 with the aim of promoting French-Canadian authors, was one of the first professional independent publishers in Montreal. Among the series he developed, two ('Documents artistiques' and 'Les Jugements') were devoted to criticism. Between 1930 and 1933 he released four musical volumes of diametrically opposing tendencies: two by authors with personal and modern ideas (*Papiers de musique* by Léo-Pol Morin and Mathieu's *Parlons... musique*) and two by the reactionary nationalist Eugène Lapierre (*La musique au sanctuaire* and *Pourquoi la musique ?*).

Lévesque published Mathieu's writings despite their polemical character, dissimilar to the tone of Morin and Lapierre. The volume contains several articles published in newspapers between 1928 and 1932, as well as new essays. Mathieu, reacting to the dominant discourses of the time, divided his remarks among three themes: musical imagination and emotion, nationalism in music, and technical questions of teaching and knowledge transmission. Divided into several sub-chapters, the essays are short and incisive.

Alongside reflections on musical meaning and the role of memory (from which 'musical creation takes shape, since to create is ultimately to alter the past', pg. 47), Mathieu finds fault with criticism, 'this art of writing with nothing to say that seems to be triumphing with disturbing ease' (pg. 41). But it is nationalism and folklorism that really brings down his wrath.

In a context dominated by the nationalist and anti-individualist discourse of the historian Lionel Groulx, Mathieu made so bold as to assert that the attempt to create a national idiom out of folkore was a dead end. 'Our contemporary music', he writes, 'should not be grafted on to the early French importations, worthy though they may be. There is certainly a mistake in the thinking of those who proclaim folkloric themes as a source of inspiration' (pg. 72). He suggested instead to look to nature for a specifically Canadian musical character (pp. 75 and 104): 'Let us be of our own age. Nationalism is not a matter of expressing the national soul, but in letting it express every conceivable subject, which is another thing altogether' (pg. 97).

Mathieu also paid heed to the precarious situation of composers. To improve this, he suggested nationalising musical production through a system of state commissions (pp. 113–21), a proposal that proved controversial since it entailed the government taking over a sphere of private enterprise with the public's monies, making a whole community into its stakeholder and manager (recall that provincial taxes were put in place in Quebec only in 1954). Mathieu's proposal was regarded

as mad and impracticable. It nevertheless had a future ahead of it, insofar as it anticipated the creation in the early 1960s of a system of commissions subsidised by public funds.

Finally, on the subject of how, in the first place, a true composer could come into being, Mathieu considers the world of teaching and training. Rather than granting 'an absolute faith in the immutability of systems invented by certain theorists who still write like Théodore Dubois' (pg. 133), he suggests, we should give more place to improvisation in the training of young musicians. He questions the value of the free teaching dispensed by European conservatoires, since most of their students' progress comes from private lessons (pp. 135-40); he casts doubt on the value of diplomas, of the Prix d'Europe, of international competitions. For him, 'the true teacher is the one who gives light to someone so that he can then enlighten himself' (pg. 180).

Mathieu's book was reviewed in several newspapers, by both musical and literary critics. Only the formidable music critic of *Le Devoir*, Frédéric Pelletier, who had strongly reacted to Mathieu's article on nationalisation a few weeks before the release of the book, kept silent. Despite their polemical character, everyone emphasised the novelty, audacity, clarity, and mordant style of these essays, and the ideas on folklore especially caught attention. 'Written by a free and progressive spirit', judged the literary critic Albert Pelletier, who added that 'even the contorted or ungrammatical sentences seem luminous alongside the drab and desolate grizzle of those who drone on the same dusty old drivel' (*Le Canada*, 7 May 1932).

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Further reading

- Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre, *Rodolphe Mathieu. L'Émergence du statut de compositeur professionnel au Québec*, Québec, Septentrion, 2004.
- Jacques Michon (dir.), *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec au xx^e siècle*, vol.1, « La Naissance de l'éditeur 1900-1939 », Montréal, Éditions Fides, 1999.

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