

The French Bassoon

“Do not send flowers yet”

Is the French bassoon’s “TRIAL” being conducted in good “FAITH”

So here is a history of the French bassoon.

A chronicle of a foreseen death.

[Translated by David Rachor, Cedar Falls, Iowa]

Here is a survey that could have begun like this: “We are going to tell you a story of a poor instrument that has only hardships, who is accused of all wrong doings, that is thrown out of the orchestra and who risks being put in a museum in total indifference. A victim of ingratitude from those who used to like it.” A very sad story, like the ones we enjoy, with the good guys on one side and the bad guys on the other ... But ... the reality is not so ... obvious.

First of all, a little bit of history ... France at the end of the sixties was fully restructured. Under the direction of Marcel Landowski the regional orchestra concept was born with the goal of decentralizing and re-energizing the musical activities of France. The conservatories had an expansion without precedent. Also at this time, Karajan was named head of the L’Orchestre de Paris. He wanted to raise this phalanx to the highest artistic level and make it into the stature of an “international” orchestra. From this demand of Karajan was born the internal conflict (tuning and pitch level among them) that will induce Amaury Wallez and his friends to embark on the German bassoon “adventure”. The fact that the German instruments and the different reeds (ah, the reeds) have a different tone quality, a certain calm was gained within the orchestra. But, on the other hand, they gained a certain notoriety outside the orchestra and the strong hatred of the closed world of the French bassoon.

About Subjectivity

At this stage of the story, dear reader, from now on keep in mind a word which is going to summarize the events of our hero: Subjectivity. The German bassoon had just opened a victorious breach in the monopoly of the French bassoon.

Slowly but surely, for diverse reasons the German bassoons were placed in orchestras and this pushed toward the exit our national bassoon. “The German bassoon integrates itself better in the woodwind section. The sound is

less typical French, more round, the low notes are freer, the reeds are easier to be played, and all this without talking about the problems of tuning.”

In the beginning, a few instrumentalists changed, because they had an affinity for the German bassoon. Certain bassoonists made the change for an attraction to the instrument, others hoping to find an instrument that was technically less demanding. Many would adopt it, without admitting it, to silence the surrounding critics and to give their orchestra a more exportable image. To be like other orchestras that exist on all the continents, an orchestra that has finally erased its specific characteristics (I was going to say “Frenchness”). Some of them changed, finally for dissociating themselves from the strong personality of the current leader. Obviously, the controversy was very heated, and a harsh defense was organized. The association called “The Friends of the French Bassoon” was formed and served as the spearhead to respond to the attacks point by point. They rebelled against the sort of trial where the accused was condemned to disappear without having the slightest chance of being heard. But, the inertia of management and the deciders of the music world in general would not attempt to hinder the change in the orchestras to the German bassoon.

Then came the cohabitation (sharing of the same stand sometimes) of the two different instruments. But the difference in technique, sound, reeds, among others, give a very specific character to each instrument.

But then, during the seventies we witnessed all the wind instruments change; they progressively abandoned their clear and narrow tone color to make a larger and less bright sound. Which to some, by osmosis made the sound easier to produce. The instruments makers themselves also participated in this change. Buffet Crampon and Selmer brought out new models which reflected this evolution. As for them, the German makers made sensible changes to their

instruments. Each camp evolved to the point that today, it is difficult to tell one sound from the other. Which then, French or German bassoon?

From Auditions to Auditions

Now the question arises concerning orchestral auditions. And here, the paradox is not a small one. Judge for yourself.

The most flagrant example was the audition for the principal bassoon position of the L'Orchestre de Paris (the domain of the German bassoon players in Paris). When the audition was completed, several French bassoon players were placed above the players of the German instruments. To the winner of the audition it was said, "You are the winner of the audition, the committee liked your playing very much, but we cannot take someone who plays the French bassoon, we can only take someone who plays a German bassoon." A strange artistic logic. Our friend politely refused to change to the German bassoon. The audition was then reopened to players of the German bassoon only, and was eventually won by an Italian.

The situation is rather difficult for those who play the French bassoon and often win international prizes. They may be recognized as a part of the world's musical elite, but cannot play their instrument in many orchestras. It is another paradox to see French bassoon players win orchestral auditions, then quickly change to the German bassoon if they want the position.

And Tomorrow

We are now going to tackle the last paradox

in this story: the teaching of the French bassoon!

The question arises to the teachers: Must we continue to teach an instrument whose future is so uncertain?

The most flagrant sign of this uncertainty is that the number of students in the French bassoon classes of professors Gilbert Audin and Jean Pierre Laroque at the national superior conservatories at Paris and Lyon are becoming less numerous.

The French bassoon is still taught in the majority of conservatories, but the creation of a German bassoon class at the superior conservatory in Lyon and a few regional conservatories can only strengthen this feeling of uncertainty. [At this time, Paris and Lyon are the only superior conservatories in France, and a German bassoon class has now been formed at the Paris superior conservatory. ed]

Is it worth training French bassoonists who may not find a single opening or who will try the "adventure" of the German bassoon with the same career problems?

What about teaching degrees? Can a bassoon professor train his students in both systems?

As long as the French bassoon wins orchestral auditions where both types of bassoons are represented, we can be hopeful.

But, if one day the trend is reversed, the specter of retirement will loom for this instrument. Then the last of the French bassoonists will be gathered together in a place that one will be able to visit and remember: "BASSONIC PARK." ❖