Utrecht: Class of '52

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Almost every musicologist recognizes the importance of conventions—even those of the less conventional kind sponsored by the International Musicological Society. Savoring more of the master class than the slave market, these meetings (now, alas, five years apart instead of three) bring together scholars and students from dozens of different nations, so that the general impression tends to be one of colorful eclecticism and exotic charm. The first meeting to take place after World War II was at Basel, but I found it impossible to attend since I was otherwise engaged. Engaged to be married, in fact; and I had been gently reminded that the doctrine of *sponsus amat sponsam* would naturally exclude the possibility of a musicological honeymoon.

I waited patiently for the next meeting—Utrecht, 1952. Increasing travel commitments to Europe, for musical and musicological purposes, had begun to make my existence resemble that *vie trifurquée* of which Liszt so often complained. My original plan was to attend the congress, and then go on to Zürich where an orchestra was waiting for me to record some music by Telemann. When I arrived in Zürich, however, limp from a surfeit of Dutch cuisine and international musicology, the news came through that the place for the actual recording had been changed to Hilversum, so back we went to Holland—my wife having traveled separately by the Rheinpfeil since she was unable to find time for the congress.

The kindly and hospitable Dutch sensibly did very little to change the relaxed, sleepy atmosphere of the old university town of Utrecht, which seemed to absorb without too much effort the sudden inundation of what Doc Davison used to call "schafters" intent on what Edward J. Dent used to call "vidge."[1] They were a splendid crowd, young and old, male and female, professors and students; and needless to say there was an especially large contingent from Germany. I had long looked forward to meeting some of the luminaries of that very musicological nation, and recall even now the conversations I had with Rudolf von Ficker, some of whose imaginative practical editions of medieval music I had produced for the BBC Third Programme.

Prominent among the *seniores* were Jeppesen, Smijers, and

Anglès, all legendary names then as now; and although I had already met Van den Borren in Brussels and the Countess de Chambure in Paris, it was heart-warming to see them once again in the midst of long-lost friends and colleagues. Many of these came from America, and their remarkable contributions to scholarship were among the most talked-of subjects in the unofficial gatherings without which no convention would be really worth attending. Dapper and delightful, Dragan Plamenac spoke about his Faenza discoveries, while two centuries back the formidable Manfred Bukofzer linked together the twin phenomena of conductus and clausula with all the skill of a born scientist. It was an inspiration to me, this opportunity to speak with scholars whom I had known imperfectly only through their published work, but I was also slightly scared when Bukofzer asked me to be his slide-operator. To project something the wrong way up or left-to-right during a lecture by this terrifyingly efficient figure would have been disastrous, but fortunately everything went well.

When the Countess de Chambure lectured on the Chansonnier Nivelle de la Chaussée, producing the original manuscript from her capacious handbag at a climactic point in the address, excitement knew no bounds, for we recognized this as a gracious musicological gesture rather than (as it could have been, in lesser hands) a staged gambit *pour épater les bourgeois*. Not everything succeeded in so rooting our attention. One paper appeared to consist of little more than a recitation of obvious errors in a Medieval manuscript, the occasion being made all the more uncomfortable by the chairman's failure to stop this chronic logorrhoea, even when its time of expiration had long passed. Another paper, delivered in heavily-measured, polysyllabic pseudo-English of a type now familiar from doctoral dissertations, left little more than an abstract impression in spite of the fact that the author-reader clearly thought of himself as some latter-day Moses propounding musicological law.

As the bemused and bewildered audience left the hall, a tall, well-dressed gentleman across the aisle, speaking in a stage-whisper of no mean dynamic range, languidly summed up his own feelings: "Well, fellers, don't blame us!" Paul Henry Lang was referring to the American contingent, and his cautionary words were then, as so often later, both necessary and accurate. I found myself agreeing with him, in subsequent conversations,

that clarity of thought and elegance of style were virtues frequently lacking in musicological matter; and that sheer weight of learning and bulk of research needed to call on those virtues for support and sustenance, rather than reject them out of hand. Lang's manner was relaxed, casual, yet dignified. He seemed to have many friends, and one or two enemies. But he was obviously no harborer of grievances or resentments, for whenever somebody tried to cut him, he would wheel round, clap them on the back, and greet them with an affable "Hi!" so that they would be bound to make at least a cringing acknowledgment.

I was much amused, and not a little impressed, by this kind of diplomacy; yet it hardly prepared me for what followed in the business meeting a day or so later. The council of the society was one of those self-perpetuating, self-ossifying bodies which, with an unbelievable lack of tact, conducted its entire business in the German language. Objections were made from the floor by the more vociferous of the French, English, and American contingents, but these had little effect since the Teutonically inclined *Oberoppellationsgerichtmitglieder* apparently understood no English. As in similar confrontations (as they are now fashionably called) the tension rose because neither side understood what the other was talking about. At this point Lang, who was known to most of us through his sinewy editorials in *The Musical Quarterly*, stood up and gave them a long harangue in German, a lead which inspired Bukofzer to do the same thing, only at greater length, the result of which was the removal of the entire council and the voting in of a new one.

And that is how the International Musicological Society became truly international.

NOTE

[1] "Schaffers" is apparently derived from *Musikalienschaffer*; "vidge" seems to be a corruption of some ancient payment in pennies, such as "Item, to Mr Robert for y^e^ tunynge of y^e^ organys. . . . . vij^d^"—thus, any kind of dusty documentary research.